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ENTHRED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER AT THE NEW YORK, N. Y., POST OFFICE.

October 2, 1895.

No. 884.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. LXVIII.



"GO, SCRATCH YOUR MADDEST SPOTS, GENTLEMEN," THE MAN OF MUSCLE
CRIED, AS HE SWUNG HIS HUMAN HOUNDS AROUND DIZZILY.

OR, THE

POTTER SPORT'S NECK-TIE PARTY.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "MONTE JIM," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MORE WHISKY THE LESS WIT.

"BLAME my left-handed sister's black-eyed cat's kittens ef—a full house's good, pardner, an' you rake down the pot! I hain't much fer ketchin' the pictur's, 'pears like, but when she comes to hoss luck—go 'way honey!"

"That's what's the matter, Tommy. If I had your luck, I'd crowd it clean to the center of the earth and back again!"

"With the New Find to back up that luck, bet your sweet life!"

"Who's a crowd? I'm a crowd, an' ef all the rest o' the crowd don't git fuller'n b'iled owls drinking luck to my good luck—waltz 'em 'round ag'in, barkeep', an' ef ary durn critter tries to play sojer, hit him on the cabeza with a bung-starter an' charge her up to Whoopin' Tom Hooper!"

"Whoo-ap an' whoo-ee! I'm a gray wolf, an' this is my night fer howlin'! I kin yell louder, spit fuder, step higher, hold my breath longer, an' smell sweeter then ary other galoot in seventeen States!"

A big, burly, good-natured looking fellow this Thomas Hooper, take him altogether, but just now he seemed bent on showing how foolish an ordinarily sensible fellow can make himself on bad whisky and plenty of it.

He was scattering money to the four winds, and had been doing so for hours, treating everybody within call, paying no attention to his change, laughing in drunken glee as the hungry-fingered "bummers" snatched at and fought over the minor coins.

More than once Whooping Tom added to this mad scramble by casting money and small yellow nuggets over that sanded floor, pausing in his crazy extravagance only when several of Peculiar's "sports" coaxed him into a game of drawpoker in order to more systematically strip this ungainly lamb of his golden fleece.

If anything, this change was for the worse; if that had been leaking at the spigot, this surely was akin to pouring forth from bunghole!

Hooper was too nearly drunk to see or to care for their tricks, and soon the wolves in human shape began "crowding their luck," shamelessly cheating the reckless miner, thinking only of filling their own pockets from his abundance.

And Whooping Tom certainly did all he could to assist in his own fleeing, ordering drinks by wholesale, betting on the flimsiest of hands, and roaring at the top of his mighty voice when some eager paw raked down the "pot" which he had been mainly instrumental in filling.

"They're just skinning him alive, Billy!" muttered one of the more decent patrons of the Alhambra to the accomplished proprietor, Billy Cope, who easily answered:

"Oh, he's all cocked and primed, and wouldn't be satisfied with anything less. They'll hit bottom all the quicker, and—Well, better skin him in here, easy-like, than outside, where it'd call for a knife or a hunk of rock tied up in a coat-sleeve, don't you reckon?"

"Oh, of course, but—hard lines on the youngster, eh? And, by glory! Here he comes now!"

A man of rather slender build and beardless face paused at the threshold, turning perceptibly paler as he caught sight of Whooping Tom and saw how far he was gone in his cups.

A more than good-looking young fellow, although he wore the rough-and-ready costume of a miner who lived by his daily toil.

A year or more past his majority, Rodney Church still seemed but a boy in comparison with those men, yet his face now showed manly passion as he listened with a darkening frown to the drunken shoutings of his partner, for such Tom Hooper was.

"Rip, slam! Set 'em up ag'in! Ef pairs was thicker'n fleas on a Greaser I couldn't ketch a weenty one! But what's the odds so long's you're happy? What's the sense in kickin' when a feller's got heap sight mo'n 'nough a'ready?"

"Fill 'em up, Billy Cope, an' hyar's yer dingbats fer to—waal, now, ef I hain't plum' ashamed of ye, Rod Church!"

Whooping Tom just then caught sight of his young partner in the New Find, and lifting his hands he rolled his bloodshot eyes up in pious horror while adding in strongly nasal tones:

"Bewar o' temptation, youthful sinner! Don't ye go fer to monkey with the whisky kaig when she's done loaded fer men! Turn thy tail fernist the porthole o' 'tarnal dee-struction which is called the saloon

whar' liquid darnation is—oh, crowd them drinks this way, Billy—come—slowly!"

"Hyar I be with a hunder-dollar thirst onto me, an' nary a sup to sip o' the brew that makes a beggar bigger'n a king, an' a kid older'n a paddy-arch! Hyar I be, Whoopin' Tom Hooper—"

"Making an infernal fool of yourself for the benefit of a pack of thirsty leeches, every finger among 'em itching to sneak away the hard-earned dust that's as much mine as yours, Tom Hooper!" fiercely cut in the youthful partner, striding forward, his face pale as that of a corpse, but his big blue eyes all aglow.

"Hello, Rod! What in time's bitin' of ye now, kid?"

"Come home, Tom Hooper, before you make a bad matter worse," sternly spoke young Church, one hand falling heavily upon that brawny shoulder. "You're in no fit condition to deal with these fellows now, and—"

"Deal? Whose deal? I kin deal top or bottom, second or thirds, strip a flush or pull a full house—"

"Come, Tom, you're drunk, and—"

"Who's drunk?"

"You are, and so drunk that these blood-suckers are draining you dry!" almost fiercely cried Rodney Church. "If you have no shame for yourself, think of me, man! It's my good money you're wasting on these sure-thing sharks, and—"

"Well, you've brought your nerve with you, kid!"

"What I say I'm ready to back up, Dick Whiffler, or you, Jerry Mixture, and that counts in the whole gang of ye!" defiantly cried Church, his red hair actually seeming to bristle in keeping with his glowing eyes as they flashed from face to face.

"You are a pack of hungry leeches, of thirsty blood-suckers, in your glory now that you've caught a drunken man to rob of his money!"

Ugly oaths broke forth at this blunt speech, but before any more decided action could be taken, Tom Hooper rose to his feet, kicking his chair noisily away behind him, as one huge paw shot forth to close with bruising grip upon the arm of his young partner in the New Find.

For a brief space the partners stood face to face, eye to eye, and great though the physical contrast was, just then Rodney Church looked by far the better man of the twain.

"It's Gospel truth, Tom, and when you're out of your cups no man'll see that more clearly than yourself," urged Church, striving to steady his voice and hold down his just anger.

"They are a pack of hungry wolves after your money. They're fawning on you now, but when stripped they'd laugh in scorn as they'd kick you down in the gutter again! You know that, Tom, old man!"

"Hitch onto his apron-string again, Tommy, poor little boy!" mocked Dick Whiffler, while his mates chimed in with similar taunts and sneering jibes, keen enough to cut through even that whisky-thickened hide.

His face flushed darker, his tones took on a menacing echo as he rudely shook that frailer figure in growing rage.

"Shet up, boy! Go home—go back to the shanty, Rod, an' let ye'r olders an' betters hoe tha'r own row. Who are you to preach to me, hey? Who be I fer to take sech guff? Go, kid! Go bunk in whar' boys an' babies ought to be, or I'll—blamed ef I don't play mammy's slipper onto the tail-end o' ye, Rod!"

A chorus of mocking laughter greeted this speech, and stung the hot-tempered pard to still rasher words and actions.

"If I'm a kid, what are you, Tom Hooper? A drunken fool can waste his own money without being called worse than an ass; but when he throws away dust that belongs to another—well, I call him thief as well as idiot!"

"Meanin' me, boy Rod?"

"Meaning you, Tom Hooper, yes! It's my money you're throwing over-shoulder for the benefit of these wolves, and—"

"Your money?"

"Since it all comes out of the New Find, yes! Haven't I a half-interest in the mine? And haven't you refused to divide until—"

Come, Tom, play white once more. Come home and be—"

A loud, insolent laugh broke in upon this milder appeal, and still maintaining his fierce grip on that arm, the drunken miner addressed the watchers:

"Will ye hear to him, gents? Talks as though he owned the airth an' hed a morgidge onto the moon, don't he? An' yit, who's he?"

"Didn't I pick him up out o' the gud-mutter when he hedn't ary bit o' grub inside, an' blamed little outside 'cept his nakedness?"

"Wasn't he a plum' beggar when I lent him a hand fer to sot him on his pegs ag'in? Didn't I keep him from starvin' or runnin' a free-lunch route all the while on-tel I struck it rich at the New Find? An' now—to hear him yawpin' 'bout his money an' his sheer, an' his—why, you red-headed son of a sea cook! You owe me fer the shirt that goes to kiver ye'r nakedness, so ye do, now!"

"You lie, Tom Hooper!"

"Steady, boy!"

"It's true! You're only one degree better than these slippery-tongued sharpers, and they're skinning you like a pack of thieves! Give me my share, then, and I'll let you run to the devil your own way!"

"Your share?" echoed Whooping Tom, with drunken hilarity. "Go 'way, boy! I don't want to lick ye, Rod, but—"

"But you'll rob me instead! You called me beggar, and you lied as you said it; but, better beggar than thief, and you're just that, now!"

"Oh, thrash the kid, and send him home to his trundle-bed!" coarsely called out Dick Whiffler, like one losing all patience with a spoiled child.

No sooner said than done!

With another roaring laugh, Whooping Tom shifted his grip, twisting Rodney Church across one elevated knee, then striking swiftly and heavily with open palm amid the mocking cries and laughter of the amused witnesses.

Wild with rage and mortification, the young man struggled to break away, but all in vain. In that mighty grip he was little better than an infant, and filled to the lips as he was with bad whisky, Whooping Tom knew no mercy, saw no further than the passing moment.

"Stiddy, babe, an' take ye'r medicine like a good kid!" he said, punctuating all with heavily-falling hand. "Mebbe ye won't feel so much like settin' down hard, but ye'll know mighty sight mo' than ye did afo', or I'm 'way off my base! Now—right eend up'ard, Roddy, boy!"

With a final stroke that sounded like the slap of a beaver tail on water, Tom Hooper righted his young partner, falling back a pace the better to laugh over the huge joke, for his clumsy good-nature was still uppermost.

Not so with Rodney Church.

He was fairly wild with rage and shame at being so treated, and as he caught both breath and balance, he lurched forward, striking viciously with both hands at the whisky-reddened countenance.

"You devil! I'll kill you! I'll have your heart's blood for this!"

Whooping Tom staggered back, confused by that furious assault, but only for the space which might be measured by a single breath. Then he rallied, and giving a roar of contempt, pushed the young hot-head backward, scorning to strike him with closed hands as yet.

"Quit ye'r foolishin', Rod! Go home an' kick ye'rself fer playin' the fool like—"

"I'll kill you for this!" fairly screamed the maddened youngster, as he steadied himself, whipping forth a long-bladed knife and lifting it as though for a death-stroke. "No man can insult me so vilely yet live to make his brags!"

More than one warning cry was raised, but Whooping Tom seemed ignorant of or indifferent to the danger he was running, and made no effort to draw a weapon or to strike down that flourished by his young partner.

One hairy paw was raised to brush across his bruised face, and then lowered far enough to meet his wondering eyes.

He saw his own blood, and for the first

time fierce rage seemed to overpower his sluggish good-nature, a savage roar bursting from his bearded lips.

Rodney Church was leaping at the throat of his partner, when a strong hand interposed, jerking him backward as its owner stepped between the two men, tall and commanding, his measured tones giving utterance to the words

"Steady, youngster! First thing you know you'll be hurting some one. What appears to be the matter, anyway, gentlemen?"

CHAPTER II.

THE MAN OF MUSCLE'S PROTEGE.

This new actor on the scene was no ordinary character, judging from his looks and the manner in which he was regarded by others in the Alhambra.

In stature he was almost gigantic, yet so justly proportioned in body and limb that his extreme height was fully realized only when comparison was made with another man.

His features were strongly marked, yet more than comely, although his heavy mustaches lent an air of sternness to his face.

His garb was modeled on the Mexican pattern, of well contrasting colors, adorned with gold lace and buttons of both gold and silver.

A single sweep of those long, muscular arms sent the warring partners apart from each other, that one action indicating a master of muscle, even as his brightly glittering eyes told of indomitable nerve.

"Put up your toad-sticker, kid; and you, Hooper! What's biting the couple of ye, anyhow?"

"I'll kill him! I'll drain his black heart dry for his foul insults!" fiercely screamed the maddened youngster.

He plunged forward with ugly weapon, only to meet that master hand and recoil again as from a stone wall.

"Steady, kid!"

"Let him come, blame him fer a fool!" fairly roared the drunken member of the New Find firm, shaking that reddened paw. "He's bloodied the face o' me! He's painted me red, when I never—"

"Steady, Hooper!"

"Steady be blamed! He's bloodied my face, an' now I'll blister his starn-post or break his fool neck tryin'!"

Now thoroughly enraged, the drunken miner lurched forward, looking even worse punishment than he spoke of, but once more the hand of the master interposed, and he was shoved back with good-natured force.

"Keep your linen on, Thomas, I beg of you! And—fall to the rear, youngster, please."

Another deft movement sent Rodney Church backward; then facing the enraged miner, the Man of Muscle spoke again:

"Don't be a fool, Thomas! Of course, I don't know what it's all about, but I do know this much: he's only a boy, all told, while you're a grown man and ought to be above tackling a kid."

Whooping Tom brushed his hand once more across his bleeding face and the look he gave that stained paw told how little his mad passions were being smothered.

"You're a man, hain't ye, Carlos Houghton?" he demanded, showing his teeth in an ugly grin of rage as he squared himself in front of that giant figure.

"Well, I try to be, yes."

"All right. So'm I. Now, lookout, fer hyar I come!"

Scant need of words by way of warning, since his actions were proof sufficient of his wicked intentions.

Crouching, and drawing back to add force to the rush, Whooping Tom Hooper fairly flung himself at the Man of Muscle, huge fists clinched, and shooting out in advance as he rushed, just as though he counted on beating down his tall adversary much the same as he had handled Rodney Church.

But, if so, he was counting without his host, for Houghton, with a deft movement, met that attack, bent arms slipping in between until they nearly touched that blood-stained face, then swinging outward

with a force that would not be denied, carrying with them those huge fists whose force was wasted on empty air.

Thus inside Whooping Tom's guard, the Man of Muscle laughed aloud as he caught the bewildered miner about the middle, twisting him off his feet and whirling him dizzily around in air as he drew erect once more.

One keen glance around, then Houghton strode across the room to the further end of the long bar, where stood a great ice-box and beer-cooler reaching from the floor almost up to the ceiling.

One mighty heave; then Whooping Tom was thrust headforemost on top of the huge box, the breath almost driven from his body, so close was the fit in his new quarters.

"Stay on ice until you cool off, Thomas!" cried the giant, drawing back with a half-laugh after performing this marvelous feat. "If your refrigerator runs short, Billy Cope, charge it all to my account."

All this took place with such rapidity that Rodney Church still stood where that deft shove had landed him, knife gripped in right hand, face pale and eyes yet aglow with mad passions.

Carlos Houghton seemed to divine fresh trouble for the youngster unless he could be removed from temptation, and hardly vouchsafing a passing glance at the gamblers and toughs gathered near yonder card-table, he approached Rodney Church, lightly grasping the wrist of that armed hand, speaking coolly but peremptorily:

"Come, lad, you and I'll take a bit of walk now."

He gave Church no chance to resist, or even to object in words, hurrying him out of the saloon and away under the twinkling stars toward the rocky slope upon which the oddly-matched pards had pitched their humble camp.

As they crossed that threshold, Houghton disarmed the young man, placing the as yet unstained blade back in its scabbard, saying:

"Keep that for carving your bacon and bride's bread, Rodney! It was never intended for human slicing, don't you know, boy?"

"I'll kill him! I'll drain his black heart dry for the insult—"

"Shut trap, boy! Kill nothing! You're crazy, lad, and don't know what you're trying to talk about," sternly yet kindly interposed the Man of Muscle, hurrying Church away from the scene of his recent trials, leaving the more thickly settled portion of Peculiar behind them.

"Stop! Not another word now until we're safely at your shack. Nor even then unless you're fairly yourself again."

The distance was not so great but that another five minutes saw the twain at the rude shanty which the New Find pards held in common.

Carlos Houghton lit a match as they entered, and by its aid Rodney found a battered tin lamp, the wick of which was soon burning, affording light sufficient for their purpose.

A keen gaze, then the giant gave a nod of approval.

"That's better, Church. You're more your own master now, although you look as if you'd been drawn through the mill since—"

"Why wouldn't I, then?" almost fiercely cried Rodney, with a passionate gesture expressive of both anger and despair. "If you only knew!"

"What's to hinder my knowing, pray?" came the cool interposition, as the Man of Muscle seated himself upon one of the blocks which served as chairs for lack of better. "True, I've got a bit of a ride to take this night, yet I can spare an odd minute or two if there's any prospect of doing you service. So—spit it out, youngster!"

"It's all along of Tom, sir, and—but you saw him back yonder?"

"On a he-old bender, too! Well, when he gets just so full he can't hold any more, you know. And after that he'll quiet down like a lamb."

Rodney Church made a fierce gesture before saying:

"When he's been stripped of every dol-

lar or dollar's worth! When those thieving knaves have fleeced him—and half of it all belongs by rights to me, don't you see, sir?"

"Blowing in partnership coin, eh?"

"Just that, sir! And after—oh, sir, when I look back and think of all we've suffered while good luck seemed scoffing at us! When I recall how we starved—yes, starved! Week in and week out we didn't have enough for one square meal a day, yet through it all we worked on and on, keeping each other's courage up by—"

"Then Tom was a man and a true pard! Then I could have sworn he was honest as the day is long, but now—"

"Now, he's just the same at bottom, Church, even if he is playing ass for a change," quickly interrupted the Man of Muscle. "Let him take his little fling, and hope for old trust to come back again, lad."

"If that was all—but it isn't all, nor half of all, sir."

With a hollow groan the discouraged youngster bowed head and buried face in hands, shivering as though in an ague fit.

"Is it so bad, then?" gently asked Houghton, a kindly hand touching those rounded shoulders. "Come, lad; you're out of sorts, now, but a good night's sleep will change all that, and you'll see life as it should be for one of your years—all rosy and golden and full of happiness!"

"You don't know, sir, else you'd hardly talk like that," muttered Church, as he lifted his head, brushing back his red hair from his high, white forehead.

"I had so many reasons for wishing to make a rich strike, and it was so long in coming. Then, when it did come true, and we saw that our wildest hopes were almost surely being discounted, I was wild to tell the good news, and—and I, like a fool, sent for my poor sister to come out here and share the grand good luck with me!"

"Your sister, Rodney?"

"Yes. And of course she'll come. It's the one bright hope we've been able to hold in common, you see, sir, since—since mother and father died and left us alone together. And now—she'll come, to find—what?"

"To find her brother a newly-fledged millionaire, of course!" lightly laughed the Man of Muscle, as the young miner broke down again.

"To find a beggar, rather!"

"Not with the New Find at your back, lad. There's enough in it to make a regiment rich for life if properly developed."

Rodney made a passionate gesture.

"Better for us both if 'twas a less bright prospect! Or—if you could only save Tom as you saved me, sir! Can't you—if you'd only dragged him out, like you did me!"

But the Man of Muscle shook his head with a half-sneer curling his lips the while.

"Don't you think it, lad! I couldn't do that, short of killing or crippling the bull-headed fellow. Best to let him have his fling out, and then he'll sober down as he used to be."

"If I could only think that way, sir. But, I just can't! Those devils will beggar us both before they slacken their grip, now they've fairly fastened upon poor Hooper."

"Oh, pshaw, boy. They can't strip him of more than he totes in his clothes, and that'll neither make nor break."

"He had all we've cleaned up, so far, but if 'twas nothing worse than that I reckon I could worry through," gloomily muttered the younger member of the firm.

"How, worse?"

"They're trying to swindle us clean out of the New Find!"

"They can't well do that, so long as you hold out against it," assured Houghton, quickly. "Hooper can't sell or squander without your signature, Church."

"Sure?"

"Of course, since you are equal partners in the New Find."

"But how can I prove all that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Tom found color first. He made the strike when I was laying off with a sick headache. And we've never had regular

papers of partnership drawn up, remember! Just agreed to share and share alike in good fortune even as we had in ill. And so—you see, sir?"

"Careless, maybe, but you're partners, all the same," assured the Man of Muscle, and if he felt less confidence than his words indicated, nothing of the fact could be read in voice or in face.

"As long as Tom kept sober I never gave it a thought, but since I sent for Iva—that's my sister, sir—and since Tom took to harder drinking, I've been doing mighty much of thinking.

"If he should be coaxed or fooled into selling out, how could I hinder it? Or how could I claim my halves if I couldn't stop the sale?"

"A lawyer could tell you all that better than I, Church, and maybe you'd better talk it over with one the first chance you get.

"Meanwhile, don't borrow trouble, but wait for Hooper to sober up, as he's got to do ere long, then have a peaceable settlement with him. He's all right when sober and will play white, never fear."

"Unless it's too late! I know Hugh Kellar's trying to get hold of the New Find, and—"

"Hugh Kellar may burn his fingers if he reaches too far," coldly cut in the Man of Muscle, rising to his feet with complete change of manner at sound of that name. "I'll chip in against the sport if he makes you any fresh trouble, Church."

"Thanks, awfully. Of course I'm not afraid of him, as man to man, but when it comes to Hooper—"

"I understand. Kellar's a bad man to have stocking the cards, but he has met his master once, and very likely will again.

"Now, I'm due elsewhere, Church, and can't stop longer. Take my advice, and let Hooper sober up, then tackle him kindly for a square settlement.

"Make him see the necessity for more than a word-of-mouth partnership, and have regular papers drawn up for you both to sign."

"And if he should refuse to do all that?"

"Oh, I hardly think he'll do that; but, if he should—well, there's still law out in this wooden country, though you may not think it.

"Now, I've got to leave, lad. I was on my way for a trip to Smackover when I heard the row in the Alhambra, so I'll call up my nag."

Crossing the threshold, Houghton blew a shrill blast, which quickly brought a noble steed trotting on the scene, and swinging himself into the saddle, he rode away, leaving Rodney Church to await the coming of his drunken partner and to suffer—what fate?

CHAPTER III.

CAPTAIN CLUTCH AND HIS CROOKS.

"Halt! hands up or come down in a heap!"

Ominously stern came that too-familiar challenge, every syllable of which was so brimful of business that Morris Bogard flung all his weight upon the brake and ribbons, checking the rapid progress of his stage so quickly that his "insides" were flung all of a heap together.

"Don't shoot! I'm up—whoa-ap, plugs!"

"Steady, all!" rang forth that same sharp voice above the confused clatter of iron-shod hoofs, grinding of wheels and brake-shoes, creaking of massive springs and inarticulate cries from inside the stage.

"We've got you covered, and the first show of kicking opens the graveyard's gates! Hands up and empty, all!"

"That's what, gents!" fairly spluttered Bogard, plainly anxious to insure his own safety while shrinking from those menacing muzzles from ahead and to either side of the narrow stage road. "It's the hull blamed rijiment out, an' every critter got a stand o' arms like—don't shoot this way, boss!"

"Button lip and leak only when called on, Morris Bogard," warned the outlaw leader, the dark muzzle of his six-shooter looking to those startled eyes wide as the mouth of a railway tunnel.

The frightened horses were fairly brought under subjection, their driver deftly hitching the reins over his bent knees, then lifting his empty hands after the regulation fashion.

From inside the coach still issued sounds which might mean fright or fight, as the case might be, and again he of the sable mask called out in tones which certainly sounded menacingly business-like:

"Careful in the hearse! If you force a show of teeth, we'll make 'em meet through hide and bones! Now—shoot at the first kick, lads."

"You bet we will, boss, and shoot to kill!" came a prompt assurance from one side of the road.

Like so many echoes that promise was heard ahead and on the other side, until it really seemed as though the stage was surrounded by armed road-agents, one and all fairly thirsting for a fair excuse to let loose their missiles of death.

An exclamation came from within, clearly from a feminine source, but the chief of footpads paid that no attention, once again addressing the driver on his box.

"Steady, Bogard! Now—what sort of live freight do you tote this evening?"

"Jest 'bout the same as usual, boss, only—"

"Who's inside, first? Names, you fool!"

"Wal, thar's a lady, boss, which hit me at Smockover, but es fer names or sech-like, why—"

"Who else, Bogard? Any one from Peculiar?"

"Wal, sir, thar's Uncle 'Lias Perkins, an'—"

A harsh execration cut that irresolute tone short, and moving a little closer, the robber chief gruffly demanded:

"Who else, fool? Isn't Hugh Kellar on your list this evening?"

"Hugh Kellar is able to answer for himself, Captain Clutch," came a clear, distinct voice from inside the stage, an instant later; but if any further information was vouchsafed just then, it was drowned by the cries which greeted that name.

He who was called Captain Clutch gave a grating oath, while his fellows seemed fairly wild to get at the speaker, cursing and growling, shouting and making all manner of ugly threats against the Sport of Peculiar.

"Steady, all!" commanded the chief, his own weapon turning muzzle in that direction. "Hold the drop, lads, but don't burn powder unless I give the word. Now, Kellar!"

"Here, Captain Clutch."

"Ha-ha! At last, you devil on ten wheels! Now I have got ye, and—"

"You'd drop me quicker'n a hot potato if there wasn't a lady in here, you cur!" came defiantly from inside the stage.

"Try to pick trigger and we'll turn that box into a riddle."

"I know you would, and that's what's the matter at this end," was the cool retort. "Let the others step outside, Captain Clutch, and then turn your lead-sprinkler on, full force. Maybe I'll get a bite while your gang's making a square meal!"

"Wind is cheap, but whisky calls for rocks, Kellar! Hold 'em down to a dead level, boys! This is our lead-pipe cinch, and we're not throwing it over our shoulder, either."

"All right, you pack of curs! Let me get both feet on solid ground, with a yard of air for elbow room; then if I don't flail your whole gang I'll eat my hat!"

Cool and undaunted came the words, but Captain Clutch showed no great anxiety to accept even such a one-sided proposition. Instead, he altered his position slightly, a touch of knees serving to guide his well-trained horse for the moment.

"You're trying to make a grand-stand play, sport, but it'll fall too flat for any kind of use," he made retort, contempt ringing in his tones, either genuine or right well simulated. "Crawl out of that, you hound! Come hands first, and let them be empty, unless you want a mule-load of plumbago."

"Mind how ye shoot, boss," called out another voice from the stage at this juncture. "Thar's a leddy in hyar which isn't broke to sech blame foolishin', an' so—stiddy, now, I'm sayin'!"

"Don't you worry, Uncle 'Lias," assured Kellar, at the same time swinging the door open on his side. "I reckon I'm the pie those curs are after, and—here I come, gentlemen."

Seemingly cool and dauntless, yet holding his empty hands where all could see them, Hugh Kellar, gambler, sport, "bad medicine" after a genteel fashion, emerged from the Smackover coach as though he was master of all, instead of being the target for a half-score guns.

"Keep your dukes up or die!" warned the masked rider, then adding for the benefit of his fellows: "Hold the drop, lads, and if he even dreams of kicking, fill him full of holes."

"Don't shake your boots off, captain," mocked the sport, airily, while flashing keen glances over the scene as though taking account of all the odds against himself. "I'm only one, and just now as meek as Moses and as mild as new milk. Shall I give bonds not to harm—?"

"The bonds'll come fast enough, don't you worry, Hugh Kellar," interrupted the road-agent chief, swinging himself out of the saddle and slipping his left hand through the slack reins as he guided his horse nearer the Peculiar representative.

"That is certain, for you're too great a coward to strike even an unarmed man without first having him tied up past harming you!"

It seemed the height of folly to thus mock the man in whose power he had fallen, but Hugh Kellar evidently knew his foeman, and that bare words could add but little to his present peril.

Captain Clutch, too, seemed pleased rather than offended by this defiance, for he burst into a peal of laughter.

"You were born a blowhard, Kellar, and I reckon it'll stick to you until death! and I reckon I'll stick to you until death! reckon that may be?"

"Longer than the rope that's fitted for your neck, Captain Clutch."

"There's a rope being made ready for a neck that's different from my head support, sport," mocked the road-agent in turn, seemingly enjoying this verbal battle. "But, before that comes to the front, let me do a bit of plain talking, please."

"You have been making a bigger ass out of your mother's son than even nature intended, and that's needless!"

"I want to know!"

"You shall know, never fear. Now, listen, you fool."

"Time past counting have you made open brags that if ever Captain Clutch should tread on your toes, or cross your pathway in life, you'd never stop until he and his outfit was fairly hunted off the face of this wide earth?"

"Well, what of it?"

"Is this true? Did you make such boasts, Hugh Kellar?"

"It is true. I did say just that!" came the emphasized response, a faint smile curling that drooping mustache and affording a passing glimpse of strong white teeth.

An ugly sound came from all the masked men, and it seemed as though one and every one would ask nothing better than to open fire, but Captain Clutch made a swift gesture, and his fellows quieted down.

"You said it then, while foot-free, Hugh Kellar; but now?"

"I repeat it to your teeth, Captain Clutch!"

"Careful, sport!"

"There's only one thing can keep me from making those threats good, Captain Clutch," persisted the sport, not quailing in the least though that revolver now almost touched his face.

"And that one thing is—?"

"Kill me, now you've caught me foul, or I'll give Peculiar the neck-tie party she's been longing for these many months."

Captain Clutch burst into a harsh laugh.

"He talks just as though he meant it all, too."

"I do mean it! I swore to hunt you off the face of the earth and give Peculiar a neck-tie party unless you quit such dirty foolishness as all this; and now, wipe me out while the cards run your way, dog! Kill me, now you've got the upper hand, or—"

"Say it, cur!"

"Or I'll play the fiddle while you're dancing an airy jig, Captain Clutch."

Again the road-agent laughed, still keeping his pistol muzzle almost in contact with the face of his dauntless enemy.

"You talk just as though you meant it all, too, Hugh Kellar, but—"

"I do mean it all, and unless you butcher me—"

"Oh, don't borrow trouble on that score, dear man," with an insolent drawl to match. "I may be a knave, through pure force of circumstances, but my worst enemies never accused me of being a fool."

"Which is the same as to say—"

"That I'd be even worse than an idiot to take any long chances while playing a game against you, Hugh Kellar! You're a cur, right enough, but you tote a set of mighty nasty teeth back of those lips, and—I say, lads!"

"Ready and waiting, boss!"

"Good enough! Fetch that rope, one of you fellows! We'll hang the hangman, safe enough; then send him in to Peculiar by Express! Ready with that lariat, I say!"

Fiercely enough issued those sentences, and none who heard could well doubt his purpose to swing up the sport; but Captain Clutch seemed in a measure thrown off his guard by the man's cool surrender, and in calling to his fellows the chief turned face partly in that direction.

The very opening for which Hugh Kellar was watching. Instantly one arm brushed that revolver aside to explode it harmlessly; then his other member shooting out with practiced power, sent the burly road-agent reeling back to measure his length upon the ground.

That fall set his good horse free, but only for an instant.

Hugh Kellar caught the reins and sprang nimbly into the saddle, giving a fierce shout of defiance as he charged straight through the lines of the astounded road-agents, then thundering away at speed as he laughed grim defiance to the hasty shots sent in his direction.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAN OF MUSCLE'S CHARGE.

It was almost like the magic shifting of a scene in pantomime.

One second Captain Clutch held the Peculiar sport under the muzzle of his revolver, backed by half a score of lusty knaves, all of whom seemed more than willing to play executioner on this cool-headed iron-nerved man.

The next second there were flying hoofs, taunting laughter, vain shots.

Captain Clutch, though partly stunned by blow or fall, or both combined, was far from being "knocked out."

Floundering clumsily there on the ground, he still retained wit and wind sufficient to cry aloud:

"Chase and catch, you reserve! Kill or capture, ye hounds! Steady, the rest of ye; don't let the stage—hands up, all, I say!"

From a little further along the stage trail came a responsive cry, as though from a force held in reserve, while those of the lawless gang who had played a more prominent part in the hold-up turned again to cover all with their still smoking weapons.

"Don't shoot, gents!" quavered Morris Bogard, from where he cowered all in a heap on his box, shielding his head as well as he could with his uplifted arms. "We hain't plum' fools—no, sir!"

"Don't shoot, boss," echoed Uncle 'Lias, from the inside. "We hain't gwine to do no kickin' unless—"

"Button lip and tumble out o' that, everybody!" commanded the chief, dusty and disordered as to garb, but certainly no whit sweeter in temper than before.

"Roll out, I say, or you'll come as cold meat!"

A graybeard quickly emerged from the stage, holding his hands up in token of submission.

"We're rollin', boss, quick as the law allows, but when a leddy as isn't used to sech-like—keerful, honey!"

Forgetful of self, the gallant old fellow lent a needed hand to the next passenger, helping a neatly garbed, youthful-seeming woman to find steady footing.

"Hold 'em level, lads," commanded the outlaw, giving but a glance to these pilgrims, eyes and gun on keen guard over the coach door. "Pile out, the rest of ye! I don't want to everlastingly sprain my bazoo tooting that tune too mighty often either."

"I'm the last coon, captain," explained a middle-aged man as he stepped forth, smiling ruefully. "Wish I wasn't; nor the first, either!"

"That means you tote a boodle, of course," commented Captain Clutch, moving closer to the stage, gun ready in case of trickery. "Nothing like seeing for yourself when—all out, eh?"

Satisfied now that the stage was empty, the outlaw turned to face his victims, flashing a keen and comprehensive look over the trio through the eyelets cut in his black cloth mask.

The latest passenger to appear looked like a fairly prosperous business man, but without any further claim to more particular notice.

The graybeard was evidently one who had fought a hard battle with fortune, and had hardly made a complete success of it, although his garb was clean and fairly respectable.

Honesty and good faith showed in every line of his rugged face, and just now he seemed far more uneasy concerning another than his own fate.

And that other!

It was very rarely, indeed, that another such passenger graced the Smackover stage, and as Captain Clutch caught his first fair view of that beautiful face, one gloved hand instinctively lifted toward the front leaf of his slouched hat.

A blond beauty, looking even younger than her two dozen years, Iva Church presented a picture pleasing enough to soften even a flinty-hearted road-agent, it would seem.

But just now Captain Clutch seemed bent on pure business, his recent downfall evidently leaving scant room for sentiment or even common courtesy; and after that one instinctive obeisance he showed the stern, pitiless footpad.

"Fall into line, there, you three!" he ordered, falling back as he spoke. "Hands up—higher, Uncle 'Lias."

"All right, boss, only—"

"Button up, you old fool! I'm doing the chin music for this crowd, you want to understand. Now, go through 'em, Kid!"

"All right, boss!" and one of the disguised ruffians came to the front, an extra hat in left hand to serve as contribution box. "An' ef they don't give down the'r milk mighty free, hyar's what'll bunt 'em too hard fer any funnin', you bet!"

There was no thought of openly resisting nearly a dozen knaves armed to the teeth and standing ready to quell or to kill.

The two men were searched, even after they had given up all valuables, for, as the nimble-fingered rascal said:

"Lyin' don't count in a mix like this, ye know, an' I'm 'countable to the boss fer a clean haul, an' so—stiddy, all, even ef I do tickle ye in the short ribs feelin' fer a hidden lead."

But no further rudeness was offered the young lady passenger when her purse and jewels were added to the forced contribution, and, almost for the first time

since the stage was held up, Uncle 'Lias drew a full and free breath.

Possibly Captain Clutch saw this and put upon it his own interpretation, for, instead of relieving the rifled passengers from their awkward position as soon as the plunder was secured, he bade them hold places until later on.

"What have you got to contribute, Bogard?" demanded the chief, turning toward the driver, who was faintly grinning at the evident discomfiture of his live freight below.

"Not a blamed thing, 'cept you want my ole hat, boss!" came the hasty assertion as he flinched from that menacing muzzle.

"That's a lie, and you know it, Jehu! Throw down the mail pouch and tumble out the Express unless you want—lively, man!"

"Oh, them!"

At a sign from Captain Clutch a couple of his men took charge of both box and bag, for the time being; then he turned again toward the waiting trio, speaking sharply, his eyes fixed upon the young lady:

"Pears like I've met you before this evening, ma'am so—your name, please!"

"Miss Church, boss, an' she hain't never b'in—"

With a sudden stride forward, Captain Clutch struck Uncle 'Lias smartly across the lips, causing him to reel back, blood beginning to stain his white beard.

"Didn't I tell you to button up, fool? Now, stay put, or I'll fit you for a high lot on the hillside."

A low cry of mingled pity and indignation broke from the young lady's lips, but she quickly smothered her emotions as the outlaw again faced her, his eyes glowing vividly.

"My name is Iva Church and I never met you before, to my knowledge, sir," she forced herself to utter, with fair composure.

A curious sound came from behind that sable mask, and the head it helped to disguise gave a vigorous nod a moment later.

"Iva Church, eh? Any relations living in these parts?"

"A brother, who is—you frighten me, sir."

Iva shrank back in sudden terror, but a half-mocking laugh came from those covered lips; a laugh that surely sounded triumphant too!

"Rodney Church, for rocks! Is it so, pretty bird? Is Rodney Church, now living at Peculiar, your born brother?"

"He is, but oh, sir, tell me; he is well? He is not—nothing evil has happened to poor Rodney?"

"Don't you begin to think it, honey! Bad luck? Rod Church? Why, my dear girl, your brother is just alive with good luck! And his own sister, you say?"

"She hain't done you no harm, boss, an' so—" began Uncle 'Lias, only to shrink away from another brutal blow which barely touched his face.

Captain Clutch turned his head for a swift look at his waiting men, and then called out in significant tones:

"How does it strike you, lads? We've made mighty nigh a water-haul, this trip, but here is Rod Church's sister, and he's freckled with dollars since hitting that New Find. Now, shall we, or sha'n't we?"

"Freeze fast to what food luck sends us, boss!"

"That's solid sense, if it did come from an empty pate, so I reckon we'll have to coax you a weenty bit, Miss Iva Church."

As he spoke, Captain Clutch reached forth a hand as though to claim this newly-found prize, but the frightened maiden shrank back.

"I don't—what do you mean, sir?" she demanded.

"That's easy told, too! Mean to hold you fast as our guest until Rodney Church puts up a neat ransom for his pretty sister; just that, and nothing shorter!"

And as he spoke the outlaw grasped the maiden in his strong arms, laughing boisterously at her vain struggles to break away from his grip.

A momentary struggle; then, realizing

how helpless she was in that grasp, the poor girl shrieked aloud for help.

With only two men nigh, and they covered by cocked revolvers, aid seemed altogether out of the question; but fate makes many odd turns, and this proved to be one of them.

A clear, ringing shout came from down the stage-road, and, an instant later, a giant horseman came dashing around yonder curve, gun out and ready for stern business, his stentorian voice uplifted as he took in the situation at a glance.

"Charge in, lads! Down 'em for keeps, and—hurrah for our side, and sudden death to Captain Clutch and his Crooks!"

That cheer was sharply punctuated by a couple of pistol-shots, the pellets hummed ominously near the ears of the startled outlaws, and, cowed by the sight and sounds, the brigands fell back in confusion.

Even Captain Clutch himself seemed scared out of his wonted cool nerve, and letting the maiden slip from his grasp, he flung up a pistol for a snap-shot, just as Uncle 'Lias gave an awkward lurch which effectually spoiled his aim.

And then, still cheering as though backed by an entire regiment, the Man of Muscle came charging down upon the gang, putting them to headlong flight, lending wings to their feet as they rushed for their horses, with his barking revolver.

"Come on, boys!" thundered the giant sport as he drew nearer the held-up stage. "Hunt 'em to their holes an' dive in after 'em! Dollar a head, from big to little, full count or runty scrubs! They aren't nigh worth it, but—hunt 'em down, every galoot of the gang!"

Shouting, shooting, laughing recklessly through it all, the Man of Muscle pressed his charge home, one chasing a dozen, yet that one—Carlos Houghton!

Dashing past the stage, the centaur gave but a fleeting glance at the passengers, then thundered on after the road-agents, who had so soon taken horse and fled around the upper turn, vanishing from view of both pilgrims and bold rescuer.

Still on dashed the Man of Muscle, bent on making at least one capture; but it was not to be. From the rocks above the stage road barked a single shot, and with a cry Houghton flung up his arms, then reeled out of the saddle, falling to earth in a shivering heap.

CHAPTER V.

UNCLE 'LIAS DOES THE AGREEABLE.

Iva Church hardly realized how speedily her frantic cries for aid were being answered, for that brutal grasp seemed to send a deathly sickness through her, and the poor girl was almost swooning when Uncle 'Lias Perkins made his awkward lurch against the pistol-aiming chief of road-agents.

With a savage curse Captain Clutch released the maiden, making a vicious stroke at the graybeard, as he turned in headlong flight, for that once thoroughly demoralized, in common with his lawless men.

Uncle 'Lias only partially evaded the blow, but he was caring very little for himself just then, and by a swift movement checked the young woman's fall, hurrying her aside, reaching the base of the nearest rocks, crouching there and forming for her a living shelter against both foes and friends.

For now pistols were barking after a lively fashion, some of the road-agents shooting as they ran, while the giant rider was by no means sparing of his ammunition as he came charging up the road.

There was a vast deal more noise than execution, however, for not one of the outlaws dropped to the earth with mortal wound, while the big fellow gave no outward evidence of injury as he sped past the stage in headlong chase.

Not until the wild rider had swept around yonder bend and so passed beyond the range of vision did Perkins shift position; then he employed both hands and tongue in assurance of safety.

"They're done gone, lady-bird; plum' racked out fer good an' ever!" he said, clumsily, yet tenderly "bracing up" the frightened and almost fainting woman.

"Don't cry, pritty! Or, ef cry she's got to, turn 'er on an' let 'er flicker like a flood o'—so, so, honey!"

Walter Hovey, the other passenger, just now showed head and shoulders from behind the scrubby bush where he had sought swift concealment at the first burning of powder, and seeing that the road-agents had vanished, he scrambled out into the road, spluttering excitedly:

"Come! Now's our chance to make a sneak while—"

"Stiddy, thar', boss!" sharply cut in Morris Bogard, from his perch on the driver's box.

"Pull out before those devils can come back! They'll take our hide next time! Come, Perkins, jump in, or—hurry, man alive!"

"Stiddy, I tell yer, critter!" repeated the driver, cautiously rising erect on his perch to crane his neck forward as though trying to look around the corner ahead. "Mebbe it's all a blamed plant fer to—wait ontel we jest know it's all hunky, an' then—I hain't beggin' fer a blue pill to settle my dinner fer supper, no, I jest hain't now!"

Actions pointed his words still keener, and Hovey shrank perceptibly as he looked in that same direction, although by this time the sound of flight and pursuit had fairly died away in the distance.

"We can't fight, so what else can we do but make a run for it?"

"That's all right, boss, an' I'm jest hon-in' to make that same run," quickly answered the worthy Jehu, "but buckin' up ag'inst a snag hain't nigh what it's cracked up to be, an' so—stiddy goes, d'ye hear?"

"I reckon it's all right, Bogard," ventured Uncle 'Lias, looking in that direction now that his fair charge seemed in a better way. "Carlos Houghton'll block the way ef them pesky critters should take a notion fer to come back ag'in, an' so—'tain't jest so clean as she mought be, ma'am, but it's mighty sight whiter'n the paw as grupp'd ye a weenty bit ago, aryhaw!"

Iva Church took the proffered hand and impulsively touched it with her trembling lips, a look of gratitude in her big blue eyes as she murmured:

"I thank you, sir, for all—"

"Don't mention it, ma'am; it cost me nothing!"

Despite his swift disclaimer, Uncle 'Lias felt all in a glow as he assisted the still agitated maiden back to a seat in the stage coach, and a broad grin wrinkled his honest visage as he stole a covert look at the tingling paw where those warm lips had kissed it.

Talk about gratitude! Wasn't that tenfold payment for all he had done, or even tried to do?

By this time even Morris Bogard felt fairly well assured that no diabolical trick lay back of that hasty flight, and feeling that the way must be open ahead of them now, he showed no further desire to delay their departure.

Jumping down from his seat, he first inspected the mail-bag and Express box, giving a husky chuckle as he found both intact.

"Glory to Abraham's bosom! Done racked out afore they could bu'st hame-strap or breechin'! Who says good luck hain't lucky? Whar's the fool critter as cain't see—git thar', Eli!"

Excitedly tossing the valuables back into place, Bogard climbed up to the box, gathered the ribbons, kicked off the brake and sent his long lash curling over the backs of his leaders.

"All aboard! Them as isn't aboard better ketch a shingle, fer—hyar we go, head up an' tail over the dasher!"

Fortunately for themselves the trio of pilgrims were fairly inside the stage before Morris Bogard cracked his whip, else they would have fared but illy; for now he was bent on making up lost time as far as possible, sending his team on at full speed, knowing that if a cunning trap had been spread for them this movement would place them beyond the pale forever.

"It's all right fer them as kin pick an' choose thar' time fer runnin' up or down the road, but fer me—I've got to trip it,

rain or shine, shoot or shake, an' so—the good Lord make it come my way!"

Matters within the stage seemed more comfortable, since they were each moment putting greater space betwixt themselves and the demoralized road-agents, judging from the course taken by the crooks.

Miss Church still showed agitation, as might have been expected, but she was rapidly rallying her nerve, for which Uncle 'Lias was mainly to be thanked.

The veteran was making light of the whole affair, declaring that Captain Clutch had meant nothing worse than a clumsy joke when talking of ransom.

"It's jest his fool way, ye want to know, ma'am. He's always makin' some sech redic'l'us break as that, but we don't pay no 'tention to it; no, we jest don't now! An' so—never let the idee bother the pritty brain o' ye, ma'am."

"But he said—my brother, Rodney!"

"Wal, ye see, ma'am, it sort o' come in handy to his clapper, names bein' the same, an' folks doin' a power o' talkin' 'bout the New Find, an' them as struck her so turrible rich. An' so, that's the way of it all, ye want to know, ma'am."

"It's a big streak of luck for a youngster, Miss Church," spoke the other passenger, with strong curiosity burning in his eyes. "Reckon your brother'll pan out a fortune afore the first snow flies."

"I don't—will you explain, please, Mr. Perkins?"

This the veteran fortune-hunter was ready enough to do, and for a space Iva Church sat enthralled, listening to the story of the marvelous fortune which had at last befallen her only living relative, Rodney Church.

As though to make the climax still more thrilling, Uncle 'Lias drew a picture of those earlier days of patient, almost hopeless, struggle against fate and disappointment; then told how, all in a moment, as it were, the two pards leaped from poverty to wealth.

"Thar' hain't bi'n a minute sence that they couldn't 'a' sold out fer solid cash 'nough to keep 'em in honey an' clover fer a month o' years, ye see, ma'am," enthusiastically declared the graybeard. "But they kept a stiddy head onto 'em, an' stuck fast to the luck that come thar' way all in a hunk. An' so—waal, now, ma'am, right thar' ye hev' it!"

"Everybody's talkin' how Rod Church an' Whoopin' Tom hes struck it so turrible rich, an' that's why Cap'n Clutch—"

"That dreadful wretch!" with an involuntary shiver. "Who and what is he? Why is he allowed to run at large when—Ugh! I just know I'll dream of them all to-night!"

"I've knowed a sweeter nightmar' my own self!" grimly assented Uncle 'Lias, but then quickly adding: "Don't waste a think on sech as him, ma'am, fer he p'intedly hain't wu'th it! Jest wipe him out, like ye might spit on a slate—so!"

"If I only could," sighed Iva, yet smiling faintly at that vigorous example. "It was bad enough to be robbed of what little—but there! I am worse than ungrateful to worry over such trifles."

"An' you'll laugh at 'em when once you're talkin' it all over 'long o' your brother, Rod, ma'am," eagerly assured Uncle 'Lias. "An' that won't be so terrible long, now, the way Bogard's welt-in' silk to his critters!"

"One thing; we're out of Captain Clutch's reach by now," grimly chuckled Hovey, yet adding a sigh for his vanished "boodle."

"Who was the gentleman who came so opportunely?" asked the maiden, with sudden interest in eyes and voice. "I just saw—there were more than one, surely?"

"Jest one when ye count 'em that way, ma'am, but that one's a hull heap when ye take him at his bigness an' fightin' weight," quickly cried the enthusiastic veteran. "An' Cap'n Clutch—Wal, ef he don't break his blamed neck makin' his heels fly, Carlos Houghton'll snake him in fer a necktie party sech as Peculiar never yit saw. Yes, he will, now."

"I'd ask no better fun than to lend a

hand to the rope, too!" gloomily muttered the fleeced merchant, then craning his head and neck out at the window as the stage whirled swiftly around a curve.

From that point the first view of Peculiar might be caught, although the town itself was still a mile distant; and now, after a brief gaze, Hovey uttered an exclamation of interest.

"What's bitin' ye, now, pardner?" demanded Uncle 'Lias, one hand instinctively moving toward the revolver nestling against his hip. "Hope thar' hafn't no snags showin' up, like—what is it, Hovey?"

"Something astir in the town which—take a look for yourself, Uncle 'Lias, and maybe you can tell better than I'm able to make out."

Without waiting for that advice Perkins was staring toward the town, where he could indistinctly see a gathering of some description; a full assembly of human beings, past all doubt, but as to the cause for that gathering he could only give a guess.

"Fun ahead, or I'm a liar!" just then called out Bogard from his box, touching up his nags again and sending the rattling, creaking, swaying vehicle ahead at an increased pace. "A neck-tie party, from the looks!"

Uncle 'Lias gave a surly growl at this, although it coincided well with his own belief; but he scowled darkly as he continued to gaze, and his thoughts were given far more to the wondering maiden within than to the seeming train ahead.

How would she bear up against this new specimen of life in the wild and woolly West?

"It's the Vigilantes, easy enough," declared Hovey, too much taken up with this new sensation to care for aught else. "I can make out old John Ironwood, and—there's a rope, and a man—lynching, for sure!"

"Blame 'em!" growled Uncle 'Lias, say-agely. "Hain't thar' plenty o' room any-ways else, so they needn't block the stage with thar' infarnal doin's? An'—Eternal Jerusalem!"

"If it isn't young—"

"Shet ye'r trap, cuss ye fer a blamed fool!" thundered Uncle 'Lias, as he caught Hovey by the neck and jammed his face viciously against the edge of the window. "Turn about Bogard, fer—"

The veteran meant well enough, but it was too late to avert that unexpected catastrophe; for Iva Church was peering forth now, and recognizing the man with the hangman's noose about his neck, shrieked forth:

"Rodney! My brother! God of mercy, they're hanging my poor boy!"

CHAPTER VI.

"ANOTHER NAIL IN HIS COFFIN!"

As that shot came from high up the rocks bordering the stage road, the Man of Muscle flung up his arms and reeled out of the saddle, falling to earth all in a heap; yet he never wholly lost consciousness, and was even cool-witted enough to save himself fresh injury by that fall.

He felt the bullet strike his skull, turning his brain dizzy and blinding his eyes for the moment.

It seemed as though his skull had been bored through and through, and his actions were guided by instinct rather than reason for a brief space.

As he struck the ground, Houghton rolled over twice in the direction of those rocks, and as he looked upward in turning, he sighted a little cloud of blue smoke, thus locating the very spot from whence that treacherous shot had been sped.

Another turn, then he scrambled partly to his feet, making a dizzy plunge forward to more secure cover, at the same instant giving a sharp whistle, that sent his good steed onward to safer quarters.

The Man of Muscle sank down close to that rocky base, dizzy, blind, faint and sick at heart.

It seemed as though death was claiming him as its prey, although that awful sensation was of brief duration.

Swiftly it came, slowly it passed away, leaving the giant with clearing brain and rallying strength, though as yet in poor condition for a fight to the death against mortal foes, should such come with a rush.

He brushed an unsteady hand across his eyes, seeking to clear his vision, gripping his revolver with nervous fingers, looking and listening to the best of his ability.

Fortunately for him, perhaps, no such enemy put in an appearance.

The road-agents had scattered as quickly as possible, each man looking out for himself, taking such side-chutes as offered, not once thinking of organized resistance.

That was natural enough, believing as they must that the giant centaur was but one of many; for surely no single man would dare charge a crowd so boldly.

Robbery, not fighting, was their trade, and the first step taken in flight put an end to all thought of concerted action.

Still, as individuals, they could, and doubtless would, both show and flesh their fangs if opportunity offered; and never for a moment did Carlos Houghton doubt the authorship of that well-nigh fatal shot.

The bullet had cut through his scalp for a couple of inches, glancing from the thick bones without serious injury, as the Man of Muscle was now able to decide, using a finger-tip as a probe.

"A fool for luck and a thick skull for a shindy," grimly muttered Houghton, still on the defensive, although he was rapidly rallying from that sickening shock. "Wonder which way the circus will show up?"

With his back propped against that firm rock, a revolver gripped by each hand, all empty chambers replenished, the Man of Muscle began to feel as though he would rather prefer an onset of some description, if only for a fair chance to play even for his wound.

"You've bloodied my head now—show up or show cause."

But no charge came from the level, not did a suspicious sound issue from among the rocks above, whence that nearly fatal shot had been winged.

Not far away Houghton could catch an indistinct glimpse of his intelligent steed waiting further orders, and a low chuckle parted his lips as he realized that he had at least one trustworthy friend and aid at command.

"Steady, boy! We'll come out jaybird in the end unless—of course we will, for that's the way we're built."

A few minutes longer he waited, but without aught happening to alter the situation in the slightest.

To all seeming he alone lingered in that vicinity, and so strongly did this feeling assert itself at length, that Houghton presently moved from his shelter, revolver muzzle pointing upward in readiness for a snap-shot as he tried for a glimpse of that elevated ambush.

He quickly recognized the scrubby bush which he had marked, but no shot came his way, no sound was heard, no movement seen, even when he recklessly stepped back to the center of the stage road.

A fairer target no marksman could have asked for, and that another shot failed to issue, was proof sufficient that the hidden enemy had left that hiding place for good and all.

So the Man of Muscle reasoned, and a frown of disappointment gathered his brows for a brief space.

By no means a lover of bloodshed and strife, still he longed to play even for that treacherous stroke at his life.

"Who tried to turn the trick?" he muttered, flashing a keen glance around on all sides, then once again scanning those precipitous rocks in front. "One of the Crooks, I reckon, and yet—was it?"

So far as he could see, it promised to be a work of time and patience, scaling those rocks; then—how had one of that scattering gang contrived to reach yonder covert so quickly?

"He couldn't, unless there's a hidden stairway up which a fellow might run like smoke. And— Well, we'll take a squint at the place anyway, just for luck."

The Man of Muscle gave a low whistle, which was immediately answered by his good steed, whinnying affectionately as he came trotting back to the spot, feeling for the caress which he was so certain of receiving.

"Steady, boy!" with his hand patting the velvety muzzle, while his eyes slowly scanned those gray rocks, dotted here and there with stunted bushes and an occasional vine or creeper.

"You hold the fort down here, while I take a swarm up yon way."

No sooner said than attempted, but the Man of Muscle found it no slight task, strong and agile though he surely was.

Foot by foot he drew himself up the rocks, only pausing at brief intervals to mark his next step or solve a puzzle which seemed to bar further progress.

Still no opposition was made to his ascent, although an enemy there ensconced would have caught the giant sport well-nigh defenseless; for he could only retain his foothold by the aid of his hands and strong arms.

A final struggle, more desperate and prolonged than all that had gone before; then Carlos Houghton drew himself over that narrow ledge of rock, to pause for breath in the very covert from whence his life had been assailed but half an hour earlier that afternoon.

A glance around showed him naught to frighten at, and knowing now that his enemy had fled through yonder sloping crevice to the rear, the tall sport lay with his back against a rock, rallying from that killing struggle.

But his eyes were not wholly idle, even now, and as they roved swiftly around, one more point was settled past all doubting.

A little to one side of where he now reclined, and just where a gray stone stood on edge close to that dusty bush, he saw a dirty blotch marring the rock; and even before moving nearer that way, he grimly muttered:

"Powder burn! The rascal took a dead rest at me, yet slipped up on it! Bah! That savors more of fool than devil!"

One in such perfect condition as was Carlos Houghton rallies with wondrous celerity from what would totally disable a man in less complete training, and hardly a couple of minutes were spent after this manner.

Rising to his feet, the giant spotter bent closer to that tell-tale mark, finding his first belief a correct one.

It was a powder burn, and proved that the hidden assassin had taken a steady rest in hopes of making a certain shot of it.

Having satisfied himself on this particular point, Houghton looked around for more, if only to make certain just how his enemy had gained that ambush-cade so quickly.

"If he was one of the Crooks—and what else could he have been? If one of that outfit, how did he get up here in such a holy hurry? For the life of me I can't see— What?"

The Man of Muscle cut his mutterings short with a quick catch of his breath, for only a foot or two from his own feet he now saw another object of interest.

A glittering article, off which the rays of the descending sun were reflected as he moved, thus altering the angle; a bit of costly jewelry, as he could tell even before stooping over to pick up that object.

As he caught a fairer view of it, Houghton uttered a low, fierce exclamation, his strong teeth giving an audible click as they came together.

It was a gold cuff-button, with enameled front and separable back, but which had seemingly been torn by more or less violence out of the linen to which it had been attached, without breaking or materially marring the jewelry itself.

It was a fine bit of work, if rather

flashy in design and colors, nothing less than a fan-shaped set of five cards, all hearts, running from ace to ten spot, forming a royal flush, in poker parlance.

The representation was perfect, although in miniature, each card being enameled in colors precisely like those found upon a regular deck of cards, and the whole must have cost a pretty penny.

But Carlos Houghton was giving no thought to cost or value, viewed from that standpoint, although a low, stern chuckle came through his lips as he muttered:

"Another nail in your coffin, my fine rascal. I thought it was odd if one of the Crooks could have climbed all the way up here, with no longer law than I was giving them; but you—I never once gave a thought to you, old man!"

He looked at the button once more, rubbed it on his sleeve, and then carefully stowed it away in security.

Again that cold, blood-chilling chuckle made itself heard, and once again followed lowly-muttered words:

"You, was it, pardner? Well, there's more fun if less profit in the game afoot, I reckon! It's you and I for it, now, Hugh Kellar!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE VERDICT OF THE VIGILANTES.

It was only too true; Rodney Church stood there with a noose about his neck, at the very threshold of a shameful death.

This was the discovery made but a few moments earlier by Walter Hovey and Uncle 'Lias, and which the graybeard was doing his poor best to hide from the maiden.

At first Iva had looked with strangely mingled horror and curiosity through the lowered window at that gathering, but then—Merciful Heavens!

Her brother, face bruised and stained with blood, hair rough and tangled, clothes torn and partly missing, the rope drawn about his neck as he stood beneath the tree turned into an impromptu gallows.

With frantic efforts the poor girl beat down and back the kindly hands which would have checked her tearing open the door and leaping to earth without care for self, seeing, thinking, feeling only for yonder loved one.

She tripped and fell, Uncle 'Lias uttering a hoarse cry of warning and pity; but ere he could fairly clear the still swaying coach, Iva was up and off again, crying out in strained tones:

"Oh, Rod, darling! They shall not—Have pity men! Don't harm him, who never harmed you! Don't!—stop, ye fiends! Oh, brother—oh, my poor, dear, darling boy."

She never knew what words passed her lips in those awful moments; she only realized, almost like one in a waking nightmare, that death was threatening her brother, and that she alone could avert that doom.

Only a weak, frightened girl; and yet, surely—these were men, not demons. Surely they would not hang an innocent orphan right before the eyes of his only sister.

If Morris Bogard had been a little less keen on the jump to catch up to schedule time if possible, that tragedy might well have been over ere the coming of Iva Church.

The prisoner had been tried and found guilty. The Vigilantes of Peculiar had delivered their verdict, and it only remained to haul away upon the rope; what the self-appointed executioners were in the very act of doing when a pair of keen eyes caught sight of the belated stage.

But that shrill scream drew all eyes that way, and the flying vision which followed so amazed the gathered citizens that few, if any, of their number gave instant thought to the condemned.

Then—his sister.

Wild with grief, and half-crazed by fears for her loved one, Iva Church rushed on, heedless of all else, never noticing those who with rude kindness sought to lend a hand or bar the way,

striking passionately at each obstacle which served to hinder her rescuing rush in even the slightest degree.

And Rodney Church?

At first he seemed like one in a dull dream, hearing, yet without comprehension, seeing, yet without recognition.

Something was happening, but how could that help him, now? The awful fiat had gone forth, and already he could feel the shameful noose of the hangman cutting off his breath.

Iva never slackened her frantic rush until fairly at the side of the doomed miner, crying out in a hysterical manner as she clasped his drooping figure in her arms, first kissing him passionately, then holding his poor, bruised face close against her bosom as she faced his enemies, eyes flashing like fire, voice ringing forth as clear as a bell.

"For shame, ye cowards! All against one, and he—my poor brother! He has done no wrong! I know he never harmed man nor beast! And so—You shall not hang him! I'll die first! I'll never—back, I say! You shall butcher me before laying even a finger on his person!"

"Git out o' the road, hyar, con-darn ye all!" fairly roared Uncle 'Lias Perkins, as he came with a bull-like rush, striking out to right and to left with his strong arms and huge fists, mowing down a regular swath, from which sprang a mighty crop of curses and angry cries as the graybeard ploughed on, never giving over his efforts until he drew near the brother and sister in distress.

"Hang nothing!" he added, tearing away that degrading noose and tossing it aside; then, lifting a business-like revolver to lend emphasis to his words: "What's the kid done, aryhaw? An' it's a blamed lie if ye say it, the pack o' ye all, too."

As will sometimes happen, the crowd seemed taken completely by surprise, and hardly an effort was made so far to guard the condemned or to hinder the rescuers; but now came the reaction.

"Brush 'em out o' the way, Ironwood!" cried a harsh voice from the assembly, followed by an ominous surge in that direction.

"Shall a foul murder go wholly un-avenged?"

"Put the noose back! Hang him like the cur he is!"

A dozen similar cries burst forth in ugly chorus, and it looked as though not one, but three victims must pay full penalty.

Iva gave a choking cry, clasping Rodney still closer to her painfully heaving bosom, but the brother seemed too nearly stupefied for more than an inarticulate mutter.

Honest Perkins dauntlessly stood his ground, seemingly ready to lay down his life in defense of the girl to whom he had taken so powerful a liking since first meeting her at Smackover; but what could one man do against three score?

Then he whose name had been pronounced, grim and gaunt John Ironwood, chief of the Peculiar Vigilantes, rose to meet the emergency, lifting high a bronzed hand and giving utterance to the rallying shout of the band.

Swift to respond, the members formed a cordon about the condemned and his newly arrived friends, seemingly ready to fight for them now, even as they had been to fight against, only a few moments earlier.

"Stiddy, the pack o' ye!" sternly ordered the Vigilante chief, now with that noose gripped in left hand, his right clasping a revolver butt. "This is our game, an' this is our killin'. Ef thar's ary powder to be burned, I know whar' it'll begin, an' right whar' it'll end, too."

"He murdered his pard without giving poor Tom the ghost of a show; now string him up—Quick!"

"That's a con-darned lie!" fairly roared Uncle 'Lias, with clinched fist, shaking grim defiance toward the vicious speaker; then adding in lowered tones for Ironwood's benefit: "Did he do it, John?"

"Yes," came the grim response. "He butchered Tom Hooper, an' that's what

this rope means, Uncle 'Lias. An' you don't want to—"

"A lie!" huskily cried the condemned youth, lifting his head from that living pillow, with a feeble show of honest defiance. "I never killed poor Tom—or, if I did, 'twas in self-defense."

Another ominous roar burst from the excited assembly at this lame defense, and he whose croaking notes had demanded vengeance before, now called out, even more viciously:

"He owns to the killing now! At first he swore he never touched poor Hooper, but now—self-defense! Bah! Where was the knife wound?"

"In the back! He butchered his pard while drunk and sleeping! No more chin music, but up with the butcher!"

A wild, pleading cry broke from Iva Church as she heard those cruel cries, and desperately summoning her strength she made a passionate plea for her brother, pouring forth a flood of agitated eloquence such as no less awful peril could have brought to the surface.

John Ironwood listened in grim silence, his bony hand uplifted to still the crowd; but his rugged visage showed no signs of softening, no symptoms of altering resolve.

"He's all I have, now, sir—all that death has left me to love and cherish!" brokenly sobbed the maiden, now bending her cheek against that drooping head, heedless of its unkempt condition, where dirt and blood had matted together the red hairs.

"My brother—my own Roddy, lad! He never—How could he, sir? As good-hearted and kind a lad as ever trod the footstool, too!"

"It's all a hideous mistake! Roddy never—of course you never did this—never harmed the man like they dare to say, Rodney?"

"No—no—I swear I never killed poor Tom!" huskily mumbled the young miner. "He beat me like a dog, but he was drunk and—I never touched him, to hurt. How could I, when—but—how came you here now, Iva? I didn't look—I never thought—Oh!"

Rodney met those cold, keen, unsympathetic eyes and shrank away from the chief of Vigilantes as from a death touch.

"I'm sorry fer you, miss; sorry all of a heap that ye didn't hang off a weenty bit longer, fer—Wal, when the med'cine's bitter, best way's to gulp it down 'thout stoppin' to taste. So—it's like this."

"The boy did butcher his pard—"

"A lie! I never—on my oath I never harmed poor Tom!"

"The boy did butcher his pard," steadily persisted the chief, "an' thar's no gittin' around that. Then—when we ketched him red-handed, what else could we do?"

"But he says—and I never knew Rodney to tell a lie, sir."

A brief shadow crept across that grim visage, but John Ironwood steadily spoke on:

"I'm sorry fer you, miss; turrible sorry! Ef thar' was even the weentiest shadow of a doubt as to his doin' the job, I'd be fu'st man to say give him 'nother shake fer his neck. But it's jest a dead open an' shet, ye see!"

"We proved it onto him past room fer doubtin' an' so—Wal, what must be cain't be hindered, miss, an' so—Reckon you'd better take her out o' sight an' hearin', Uncle 'Lias."

"Ef ye could fix it to jest sort o' wait a bit, John?" coaxingly muttered Perkins, brushing an unsteady hand across his eyes as that anguished cry escaped the maiden's lips.

"Thar's 'nother—'tin', Uncle 'Lias," slowly answered the Vigilante chief, gaunt jaws working rapidly on his quid of plug. "Tom Hooper's waitin', fer his last plantin', but do you reckon he could sleep in peace over thar' 'long's his killer run afoot an' alive?"

Uncle 'Lias was silenced by that quaint reproof, but Iva cried out anew in mental agony, plainly suffering far more acutely than he whose life was in greatest peril.

She scarcely knew what words crossed her lips. She was pleading for the life most precious to her just then, and ceased only when that awful dizziness came to turn brain upside down and blind her tear-damp eyes.

But the sound of her sobs, her prayers, her pleadings, served to arouse the accused from his strange stupor, and with something like his wonted nerve, Rodney spoke to his loved one:

"Go, Iva; there's a darling girl! You can't save, nor even hinder, so why do yourself more harm? After all, it's a quick and easy ending, and I never—before Heaven I am not guilty as charged."

"Don't I know? Those cruel demons! I'll never— We'll die together, if die you must, darling!" hysterically sobbed the poor girl.

All this had a certain effect upon the gathering, and no longer came those vicious cries for life in exchange for death.

Even grim and stern old John Ironwood was visibly affected, while Uncle Lias blubbered like a veritable schoolboy.

But the chief of Vigilantes knew what duty was, and rallying after a bit, he gently touched Iva on the shoulder, saying:

"Come, pritty, don't make a bad matter mighty sight worse by kickin' whar' kickin' can't do no good. Go with Uncle Lias, an'—"

"Yes, go, Iva, dear!" huskily muttered Rodney, trying to loosen that loving embrace as he spoke. "Go, darling, or they'll treat you still worse. And—you're making it harder for me, dear Iva."

Ironwood tightened his grip, drawing her away as he sternly cried:

"Do your duty, men! Cut it short, for that's no use—"

"Hold hard, there, gentlemen!" came a clear, commanding voice.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MAN OF MUSCLE OFFERS BAIL.

Up to that very instant not one among that entire assembly saw or heard aught of the new-comer, yet he had ridden up to the very edge of the crowd, and now sent his good horse plunging recklessly forward, scattering the astonished fellows to right and to left, knocking more than one endlong in that impetuous charge.

"Make way for your uncle, Johnny," cried the wild horseman as he fairly split the crowd asunder, never slackening pace in the slightest until he was fairly beside the condemned miner, under the death-tree.

Springing lightly to earth, the Man of Muscle caught John Ironwood by an arm as though simply to save himself from falling after that leap, but at the same time making a deft motion of a spurred foot which sent the chief of Vigilantes plunging endlong half a score of feet away.

Then, grasping the bound miner about the middle, Carlos Houghton swung him clear of the ground, landing him safely astride that warm saddle, then giving a sharp cry which seemed intended more for beast than for human being.

With a short, sharp turn, the good horse wheeled and plunged back the way he had come, kicking and striking with all feet, biting viciously at those nearest his line of flight, then stretching out in a low, smooth gallop, as he fairly cleared that amazed crowd.

Taken completely by surprise though he certainly was, Rodney Church kept his seat wonderfully well for a man whose arms were still bound behind his back.

"Steady, everybody," cried Houghton, in clear tones, as he saw his admirably tutored horse win clear with his helpless burden. "Don't fly off the handle all at once, now, but give a fellow a chance to explain what— Curb your bulldogs, John Ironwood."

Swiftly rallying from both surprise and fall, the chief of Vigilantes now came that way, gun in hand and dusty face showing ominously stern; but, instead of flinching or pleading for peace, the Man of Muscle demanded aid as a vested right.

At the same time Houghton caught the

nearly swooning maiden in his arms, saving her from an awkward fall on the stony ground. And, was he holding her as a living shield against a possible shot?

Hardly a score of seconds, though; then Iva was deftly shifted to his strong left arm, while his right hand gripped a heavy revolver, forefinger inside the trigger guard and thumb on hammer as he flashed a cool, dauntless glance around that rallying assembly.

"You've done it now, hain't ye, Houghton?" harshly demanded John Ironwood, as he stepped closer, pistol rising toward that brave heart. "If you can't show mighty good cause—"

"You can send me up a tree to fill the kid's place," coolly finished the giant sport, but without wasting a look in that direction.

Right well he knew that Honest John would never shoot or strike at a man who made no show of defense, but he shrewdly doubted the same degree of chivalry so far as the main crowd was concerned, and held his gun in readiness to anticipate any snap-judgment from that quarter.

"Take it cool and easy, gentlemen, all!" he cried, for their particular benefit. "I really hate to spoil sport, but the honest facts of the case run like this; you're trying to hang the wrong man, and I can prove every word of it."

"Oh, thank kind Heaven!" gasped Iva Church; then she hung a limp and seemingly lifeless weight across that strong arm.

All this combined to aid in the escape of Rodney Church upon the trained steed, and now the fugitive was rapidly passing beyond pistol-range, his mount heading for the nearest cover—a point of rocks around which Carlos Houghton had ridden only a brief space earlier.

The Man of Muscle saw all this, and his keen eyes gave a vivid twinkle as he saw the animal swing behind that friendly shelter without so much as a single shot being fired in that direction.

Like nearly all the rest, John Ironwood seemed to forget the fugitive in the rescuer, and his grim smile deepened as he spoke, coldly:

"I reckon I'll have to stretch your neck, pardner, for lack of a better one!"

"All right, my friend, if you can show solid cause," came the prompt retort, that strong face turning his way now that the chances of a vengeful shot from the crowd grew less strong.

"Cause? Didn't you turn Rodney Church loose?"

"Of course I did, and I'm mighty glad of it, just as you all ought to be when you realize the truth of what I'm telling you; that hanging is played out unless— I say, Ironwood?"

"Well, say it, blame ye!"

"What's all this rumpus about, anyhow?"

With admirable coolness came this question, backed up by a frankly innocent smile from which the grim Vigilante shrank as from a blow.

"I don't—didn't you say—" stammered Ironwood, for once in his career at a loss for words to express his feelings.

"That you were trying to hang the wrong man? Of course I did, and I say it all over again, now. Why wouldn't I, when it's gospel truth?"

"Make him prove it, or let him stretch the rope instead!" came an ugly call from the crowd.

"Another county heard from, and its name is cabbage-head!" mocked the Man of Muscle, then speaking more directly to the Vigilante leader:

"There are only two crimes that justify merit punishment by the hangman's noose, friend John. One of those is horse stealing, and you can see for yourself that I've just trusted Rodney with my nag; worth an entire herd of ordinary plugs, too."

"But that isn't the point, Houghton."

"Didn't I just say as much? Haven't I shown how worse than ridiculous it would be to even dream of Rodney Church stealing a horse?"

"Well, that only leaves one other ex-

cuse for hanging; murdering a fellow being while wholly off guard, and that is—"

"Just what Rod Church done, too!" harshly cut in John Ironwood, with a stern gesture that fell little short of being a blow.

The Man of Muscle never flinched, never "turned a hair" as the expressive saying runs, but coolly met that glittering pair of eyes as he clearly enunciated:

"If any other man should tell me that, Mr. Ironwood, I'd say he lied like a cur! As it is, I simply say, you labor under a mistake."

Just then Iva Church gave a mean of reviving consciousness, feebly striving to support herself; but without vouchsafing her a thought, John Ironwood harshly spoke in his turn:

"I said it, Mr. Houghton, an' I say it all over ag'in; Rod Church butchered his pard, Whoopin' Tom Hooper, an' never give him a show fer his life! An' ef ever a livin' man deserved hangin' fer doin' murder, that critter is Rodney Church!"

"No, no!" wailed Iva, growing faint once more as those words smote upon her ears. "He never— I don't— Oh!"

The poor girl reeled and would have fallen heavily only for the prompt action of the Man of Muscle.

Supporting the maiden on an arm, Carlos Houghton threw up his other hand as he spoke, sharply:

"Make way, gentlemen! The poor lady has fainted, and—make way, I say! After I've cared for her, I'm wholly at your service, for life or for pulling hemp."

Raising that fair burden clear of the ground, the Man of Muscle bore it swiftly to where the stage was still standing, placing Iva inside upon a back seat, then speaking hastily to Uncle Lias, who had borne them close company:

"Take the lady on to the hotel, Perkins, please. See that she has such care and attention as she ought, and I'll make it right with you, later on."

"'Course I will—why wouldn't I, then?" snuffled the veteran, who seemed all broken up over the misfortunes of the fair pilgrim. "Don't ye go blaatin' 'bout pay-back, blame ye, or I'll lick ye all over a quarter section—so thar', now."

"Good enough, Uncle! I'd gladly take the licking, though, if we could have everything straightened out before the poor child comes back to her senses!"

There was a complete change in both face and voice, now, as the giant sport stood for a brief space gazing down upon that fair face, more than ordinarily lovely even now in spite of the grief marks.

But that was no time for sentiment or for moralizing, for ugly notes were sounding across that scant interval, and lest still worse should follow further delay, Houghton hastily repeated his instructions concerning the insensible maiden, then turned sharply away to face what fate might be in store for himself.

It was easy to see that the crowd was rallying from the surprise, and that they were in anything save an angelic humor at being robbed of their human prey without so much as striking a blow or firing a shot in defense of their rights.

Ugly cries took shape in words which more than hinted at the hangman's noose, while one reckless fellow even howled aloud:

"Blame so much chin music! We come hyar fer a neck-tie party, an' this high-toned galoot cheated us out of it. Now—make him fill the boots o' Rodney Church, blame him!"

A cold smile curled those formidable mustaches as the Man of Muscle swept his eyes over the angry gathering, but he spoke with grave earnestness a moment later:

"What action I have taken, gentlemen, was based on a firm belief that you were falling into a fatal error. I can't think that Rodney Church would commit such a foul deed, and so I—"

"You said you could prove we was tryin' to hang the wrong man, didn't ye, Mr. Houghton?" sternly demanded the Vigilante leader.

"I did say so, and I still hope to make my words good before all the world."

came the swift rejoinder. "I'll go the lad's bail, and if a thorough investigation of this case proves me in the wrong, I'll either fetch him back to pay penalty, or give my own neck to the rope as his substitute."

"All right, sir, but we'll try to find the boy ourselves!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE FATE OF WHOOPING TOM.

The Vigilante chief made a gesture which caused a sudden stir among his followers, but before Houghton could fully make out what this meant, Ironwood tapped him on an arm, curtly saying:

"Your bail's all right, far as it goes, pardner, but now—come an' see fer your own eyes!"

"Anything to keep peace in the family, my dear sir, but—"

A faint smile crept into his strong face as he glanced around.

Half a dozen of the Vigilance Committee had closed in and now acted as an armed escort; an honor which the Man of Muscle could very well have dispensed with had his wishes alone been consulted.

John Ironwood smiled grimly.

"One sech stir-up is more'n a plenty, Mr. Houghton, an' I reckon we kin worry 'long 'thout doin' of it all over ag'in. No trick, no harm."

"Oh, I'm not kicking in the least," cheerfully declared the giant sport, obeying the impulse lent by that brown hand and moving easily away from under the death tree. You needn't take the trouble to tell me where I'm bound for unless the fancy strikes you too hard for comfort, Mr. Ironwood."

"We're gwine to take a look at the sort o' proofs we kin show, Mr. Houghton; an' then—Wal, it'll come your turn to read your title cl'ar, I reckon, later on!"

To an ordinary man this curt explanation would have been far from comforting, but the tall rider smiled as though he had caught a sweet love-whisper, nor did he betray any uneasiness when, that brief walk under guard ended, he paused only a few feet from a blanket-covered shape resting at length beneath a scrubby tree.

He divined what was coming, even before John Ironwood stooped to turn back that dingy shroud, for only a few yards away he saw the ruins of a shanty; that under whose roof he had left Rodney Church the night before.

A pile of ashes, a few blackened timbers and fire-scarred stones alone marked that location.

The Vigilante chief drew away the blanket, then gazed keenly into the face of his present companion, as though trying to read his inmost thoughts just then.

"Look, Mr. Houghton. This is what's left of poor Tom Hooper!"

A fire-blackened corpse!

The Man of Muscle gazed upon that grewsome spectacle for a brief space in silence, although the remains were not sufficiently marred by the flames to render recognition at all difficult, then he gravely said:

"Poor fellow! Who would have thought it, only last night, when he was having such a lively old time! Then—and now!"

"How do you reckon he come so, Mr. Houghton?"

"Smothered by the fire while in a drunken fit, beyond doubt!"

Promptly and confidently enough came this answer, although the Man of Muscle knew right well his interpretation could not be wholly correct after all he had seen and heard.

"If it wasn't no wuss' than that!" ejaculated the chief of the Vigilance Committee. "Ef that could be showed the way of it, but—What do you make out of this, then?"

With a swift motion he turned the body over on its face, parting the scorched shirt with one hand and pointing out a ghastly knife-wound between those broad shoulders.

Carlos Houghton bent forward for a closer look before venturing a reply, but this was a sort of evidence one could

neither laugh at nor ignore, and his tones were changed a bit as he spoke, slowly:

"Well, sir, it does look ugly, but—"

"It is ugly, Mr. Houghton, an' a mighty sight mo' ugly then she looks on the surface, too, wuss' luck!"

"Still, as I said before—"

"Easy, sir," swiftly interposed the chief of the Vigilantes, as he arose erect, one hand adding a gesture of caution. "Mebbe you hedn't better do too mighty much talkin' afore—Dick Whiffler."

"On deck, your honor!" came the instant response, and a fairly presentable figure moved a little nearer the center of interest.

Carlos Houghton instantly recognized the fellow as one of the party with whom the deceased had been playing poker at the Alhambra, the night before—a gambler by profession, but one who had borne an indifferently fair reputation to date.

John Ironwood looked at the Man of Muscle with a grim smile, then spoke again:

"Back yender you sort o' talked like we hedn't stopped to think or to reason afore we rushed the rope, Mr. Houghton. Now, mebbe you'll open ears a bit?"

"They're wide open, pardner."

"All right. Whiffler?"

"Ready, boss!"

"Tell it all over ag'in, will you? Make it come so cl'ar that this gent cain't help seein' what we all see; will you?"

The gambler cast a shy glance at the corpse, shrugged his shoulders as one might who finds a far from agreeable task thrust in his way, then spoke in low, but fairly even tones:

"Well, sir, it's a nasty job, take it all the way through, and I'd a heap sight rather somebody else had it to do."

"Never mind all that, Whiffler; tell what you seen an' done. No man kin blame you fer that, ef he's honest; an' ef t'otherwise, who cares a button?"

"Well, gentlemen, it ran just like this, you see," began the witness, with fluent speech, like one who, having naught save the naked truth to convey, found no difficulty in putting facts into words.

"I reckon you all know the way I make my living. And so, you see, I was up pretty well along in the small hours, playing cards at the Alhambra, and that's why 'twas so late when I started for my bunk."

"Come down to the main p'int, Dick!"

"All right, sir! And so—that's the way it happened! We saw the blazing shack, and raised as big an alarm as we could manage with only our throats to do the hollering, then we jumped in and pulled out—just that, sir!"

A little nod toward yonder grim corpse pointed his words.

"We jumped in, you say?" asked Houghton, sharply.

"Yes, sir. Jerry Mixture was along, you understand? We left the Alhambra in company, and kept together through it all."

"You dragged out the body? How did you know there was one in the blazing shack, first?"

"Well, sir, that's easy, too!" promptly answered the gambler, showing no trace of anger or of confusion, although Carlos Houghton both spoke and looked as though he strongly suspected something crooked.

"We saw the light, which looked as though it hadn't hardly got a fair grip on the shanty. Of course, we yelped out the best we knew how, for a fire is a mighty nasty thing when it gets a good start in a place like this, as maybe you know without—"

"Stick to the p'int, Dick!"

"Yes, sir. And as we run up close, Jerry and I, we caught a glimpse of somebody lying inside the shack, like he was sleeping; and then—well, we just made a bulge together and snaked it out."

"Heroic, and all that!" half-mockingly commented the Man of Muscle, then asking sharply: "Where was Rodney Church all this time?"

Dick Whiffler shrugged his broad shoulders before drawing forth the words:

"I'll never tell ye, for I don't know! He wasn't in the shack, though, for dead sure!"

"That'll do, Dick, for just now," interposed Ironwood, with a nod and gesture.

"That was the way the alarm was given, Mr. Houghton, and it didn't take so mighty long afore pritty nigh the hull town was turned out to do what mought be done; turrible little in this case, though!"

"And terrible little evidence on which to hang a poor boy, seems to me, Mr. Ironwood," impulsively cried the sport, eyes glowing vividly. "If this is all the proof you picked up against Rodney Church—"

"Wait a weenty bit, will you, pardner?" crisply cut in the chief of Vigilantes.

"All right, sir; only—"

A brown hand lightly touched his lips, and as the giant sport was silenced, John Ironwood took up the broken thread of the story.

"I was sleepin' when the fu'st row kicked up, but it didn't take me so turrible long fer to git hyar, an' then I tuck full charge, by vartue of the office I hold," explained the Vigilante.

"Thar' didn't nobody even dream o' its bein' wuss' than a nasty accident, sir, an' that was why we tore the shebang wide open; reckoned the young feller must be in thar', smothered, or stunned, or sech."

"He wasn't?"

"Wal, sca'cely," with grim sarcasm. "No, he wasn't inside, but we didn't hev' all our work fer nothin', jest the same, though!"

"Fer one thing, we kept the fire from kiverin' over the killin' o' Whoopin' Tom Hooper. We tuck it he was choked, like, by the smoke an' the flames, an' so tried our level prittiest to fetch him back to his senses."

"'Stead o' that, we found this nasty hole atwixt his shoulders."

Once more John Ironwood called attention to the knife-wound, on which he rested his charge of murder.

The rescuer looked grave enough as he admitted that proof of violence, but he was not yet ready to admit the deduction drawn from it.

"It looks ugly, I'm free to admit, gentlemen, but still I claim that is no proof positive that Rodney Church did the foul deed."

"You really think that way, pardner?" asked John Ironwood, with the ghost of a smile curling his iron-gray beard the while.

"I do, and more; I'm ready to stake my very life on the fact!" firmly declared the Man of Muscle. "Say what you will, hint what you like, I hold firm in my faith. Rodney Church never killed Thomas Hooper, nor can you make me believe he did—so there!"

"You talk just as though you meant it all, pardner!"

"I do mean it all! I'll wager my life—"

"Go easy, man!" sharply cut in the Vigilante chief, both tone and manner altering greatly. "Ef you make sech a fool bet as that, you'll lose to a dead moral! For—See!"

With a quick movement Ironwood produced the half of a knife-blade, holding it up in front of that stern-set face, speaking with cold deliberation as Carlos Houghton gazed upon that mute witness.

"You've done saw what sort o' hurt finished off poor Tom Hooper, Mr. Houghton, an' now—this is what dreened his heart! An' I tuck the bit o' steel out o' his karkidge my own self!"

The sport gazed keenly at that broken blade, like one trying to recognize or identify it, but that was impossible, taking the piece of polished steel by itself.

It was of ordinary shape, and the name of the maker was missing—just such a bit of metal as might be found almost anywhere.

"I could match it without half trying, Ironwood," the sport asserted, following out that swift train of reasoning. "If you base your belief on that alone, you're wilder than even I thought."

"Don't git over the traces, please, Mr. Houghton," warned the leader of Peculiar's law-and-order representatives. "I said we didn't hev' all our hot work fer nothin', an' I meant—like this!"

With another quick movement he produced a blackened article and brought it in contact with that broken blade.

That article was the metal-bound haft of a knife, and the two pieces now formed a complete whole.

"We found this handle layin' right whar' the corpus was tuck from, Mr. Houghton," slowly added John Ironwood, his eyes all aglow. "You kin see fer yourself ef she fits snug or not, sir."

CHAPTER X.

A GLOOMY OUTLOOK FOR RODNEY.

In spite of his strong nerves, Carlos Houghton could not help betraying a degree of discomfiture at this fresh evidence, although he tried hard to mask it from those curious if not inimical eyes.

"Ask him if he ever saw the knife before, boss!" cried out Dick Whiffler, an instant later. "He was at the Alhambra last night, when—"

"When you and your gang were fleeing a drunken man—just so," crisply cut in the sport. "Pity you didn't hold the body since you kept the hide, isn't it, Mr. Whiffler?"

"Go easy, Mr. Houghton; an' you, Dick, hold your hush," coldly commanded the Vigilante chief; then looking steadily into the big fellow's face, he added:

"Sence the question's b'in asked, pardner, reckon you mought as well answer it. Kin you place the knife, now I've put it together, sir?"

Houghton bent his head a trifle for a closer view, although that was hardly necessary.

Even before Dick Whiffler spoke, recognition came, and Carlos knew this was the same weapon Rodney Church wielded there in the Alhambra while vowing to play even with his drunken pard.

"How is it, sir?" asked Ironwood, after a brief silence.

"Well, where knives are so much alike I wouldn't care about taking oath to even my own, much less this," gravely answered the sport, drawing erect once more. "It may be, and it may be not—who can tell?"

"I can, for one," declared Ironwood, replacing those ugly proofs in security once more. "Thar's the initials cut in the horn—R. C. I've noticed 'em more'n once, days gone by! Then, too, the break fits to a 't.' An', ef anything furdur was needed, thar's them as kin sw'ar they see me find an' pick the knife up right yender, right whar' the body was layin' when Dick an' Jerry toted it out o' the fire!"

Truly, matters were beginning to look gloomy for Rodney, but Carlos Houghton was a stanch and stubborn partisan when once enlisted, and even now he declined to yield an inch.

"Even if the knife can be traced as having belonged to Church, what does that prove? Nothing worse than that he might have lost the weapon for the actual killer to pick up!"

"Nur that, pardner," grimly negatived the Vigilante. "Thar's them as kin make oath the kid tuck the knife with him when he left the Alhambry, last night, an' mebbe you kin say the same thing, sir?"

"Not on oath," quickly answered Houghton, brazenly meeting those keen, if not actually suspicious, eyes, although he knew only too well how empty was the hope his past words suggested.

He knew that Rodney Church did have the knife after leaving the saloon where he made those vicious threats against the life of his drunken pard; more, that he still had the weapon when they twain were together in the since burned shanty on the slope!

"Wal, thar's them as kin make that same oath, Mr. Houghton, ef ever it's called for, jest as they did make it when we fu'st hauled the youngster up fer killin' of his pard."

"What did he have to say on that point? Or—did you take snap-judgment on the poor devil all the way through?"

John Ironwood flushed a bit at that curt, almost insulting address, but he was a man of great self-control, and, feeling how surely he was in the right, could afford to look over all such minor points.

"That's all right, Mr. Houghton, ef you kin only make it seem so to your own self. What I've done, or what I 'low to do, lays wide open fur all the world to 'spect it, so—"

"Beg your pardon if I've said aught out of the way, Ironwood, but I feel strongly in this matter, and so—you understand?"

"Let it drap, I say, Mr. Houghton," was the cold rejoinder. "Time fer pickin' up them littler p'int's when this bigger one's got clean shet of. So—this was the way of it, ye want to know."

"When we see fer sure the kid wasn't inside the burnin' shack, an' found out how Hooper was stobbed 'stead o' smothered, an' hed them two bits o' proof clapped onto each other, 'course we wanted to know whar' Church was, an' why he was!"

"Then—wal, the boys was worked up pritty warm over what we'd found out, an' I reckon they was makin' ruther more noise then the law 'lows; but, anyway, the young feller jumped up out o' them rocks, over yender, an' tried his level fer to outrun us all!"

"Tried to escape, you mean?"

"Wal, now, it did look mightily that way!" grimly admitted Ironwood, while a distinct snicker came from his armed guard.

"Because the poor boy took you for enemies, not friends," quickly explained the sport. "Little wonder, either, after his experience at the Alhambra last night."

"That's your way o' lookin' at it, pardner."

"What did he say himself, though?"

"We ketched him fu'st, then fetched him down to whar' pore Tom was in a smoky heap. The kid seemed all broke up over it, that's a fact, but was it natural?"

"Why not? Wouldn't you be broken up over the butchery of a pard?"

"Wal, that depends; but what I meant was like this: The kid swore he never knowed nothin' 'bout it, from start to finish, but that he'd jest woke up from a sound sleep!"

"Mind ye, sir, out thar' 'mongst them rocks, not a hundred yard from the shack itself! An' it in full sight an' hearin' of all our racket an' row an' rumpus! An' him—sleepin' like a weenty stray lamb!"

"Now, sir, let me ax ye, coolly an' ca'mly, was that sound sense?"

"If he swore to just that, it was solid truth," firmly asserted the Man of Muscle, true to his colors against all odds. "Did he say that was the first he knew of trouble in the air?"

"Jest that way," admitted Ironwood. "He swore up an' down that he jest waked up, an' that this was the fu'st he knowed of anything wrong."

"I knew it! Rodney Church never killed Tom Hooper, and I'll live to make you all admit as much, too!"

John Ironwood made an impatient gesture at this too enthusiastic outburst, his own tones growing harder as he spoke on:

"It's mighty easy to talk when ye feel that way, Mr. Houghton, but empty wind's one thing an' solid facts is 'nother. An' I do reckon we've got the biggest heft o' proof onto our side, now, hain't we?"

"Not to my notion," stubbornly declared the sport. "And we've got right on our side, which is worth mighty sight more!"

"Wal, sir, it's the right we're all after, an' ef you kin help us to git that settled on, we'll owe you more'n thanks, anyway," frankly admitted the chief of the Vigilantes.

"If Rodney Church said that—"

"He said a heap more'n that, ef you'll let me do the tellin', sir," a little less patiently interrupted the master of ceremonies.

"Excuse me, sir. Go on, I beg of you."

"He said like this: That he was sound asleep when Whoopin' Tom come home from the Alhambry an' started him up by kiekin' an' cussin' of him all over the shack!"

"Assaulted him, you mean?" quickly inserted the sport.

"That's what he said, an' his face bore him out that fur, too," admitted Ironwood. "Swore Tom jest hammered an' punched an' kicked him to kill, so he didn't dast fer to stop thar' any longer. An' so, 'cordin' to his way of tellin' it, Church run outside an' bunked in up 'mongst them rocks yender, not to wake up ontel we scart him out o' kiver."

"Beat him like that? Then the boy ought to have killed him!" exclaimed the sport, vehemently, as Ironwood broke off his recital.

"Yes, providin' he done it like a white man, but—stobbin' a man in the back, atwixt his shoulders?"

"Still, if done in the heat and fury of a fight for dear life? That makes all the difference, don't it?"

Carlos Houghton spoke like one feeling he made an important point, but the Vigilante chief was ready with an answer.

"Yes, ef done in a fa'r fight, but—was it?"

"Who's to say it wasn't, pray?"

"The kid himself said it!"

"What?"

"Rodney Church himself swore he never done it," repeated John Ironwood, in slightly altered form. "Ef he done the cuttin' while fightin' fer dear life, as you put it, Mr. Houghton, why deny the facts?"

"If he did deny it, probably 'twas because you'd first scared the poor devil clean out of his wits," suggested Houghton.

"That won't work, nuther," came the swift retort. "We wasn't doin' no scarin' when Tom Hooper was cut, nur when the one as did that cuttin' was settin' the shack on fire in hopes of kiverin' over his bloody deed, was we?"

This was an awkward point to pass, and for once the Man of Muscle felt at a loss how to safely parry that thrust. And Ironwood lost no time in pressing the advantage he had won.

"Right thar' ye ketch the nub of it all, Mr. Houghton! Ef the boy'd run fer help quick as he could, an' not tried to kiver over the cuttin', never a man of us all but would hev' said he was justified."

"But—why didn't he do that way? Why didn't he tell of the way Whoopin' Tom misused him, an' plead self-defense?"

"No doubt he had all sense hammered out of him, judgin' from the little I saw of his face a bit ago!"

"He hed sense 'nough left to set the shack on fire, then go out an' hide in the rocks—"

"Why didn't he run clean away, instead of stopping so nigh, though? If he killed Hooper, and was afraid to tell of it, wouldn't he run clean off, instead of waitin' right here?"

"Who's to say that wasn't what he 'lowed to do, but wasn't he hendered from doin' of it by the lucky comin' up of Dick Whiffler an' Jerry Mixture?"

The Man of Muscle kept silence now, for he had no answer ready. The more it was probed into the blacker looked the case for Rodney Church.

And then, not loud, but all the more ominous for its depth, came a cry from the witnesses, then the harsh words:

"It's a bloody murder, easy enough! Kid's gone, but he's hyar! Run him up a tree sence he's cheated us of the right murderer!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE MAN OF MUSCLE'S PLEDGE.

Quite enough to blanch the cheek and quail the spirit of an ordinary man, but that was not Carlos Houghton's way.

Those fierce words came through the lips of Jerry Mixture, but he was backed up by a goodly number of citizens who had flocked to that spot like carrion crows to a feast.

The armed guard looked black enough, although as yet they joined not in the outcry, and giving them no heed, the Man of Muscle deftly pulled his guns and boldly faced those menacing his life.

"Keep your linen on, gentlemen!" his clear tones rang forth as he ran his eyes over the enemy as though to decide just

where his greatest peril might lie. "I don't want a fight, nor can you well afford one, twenty against one!"

"Steady, everybody!" warningly cried John Ironwood. "Ef thar's any fightin' to be done hyar, reckon we kin 'tend to it our own selves."

"There'll be no fighting unless I'm crowded too mighty hard, and not even then if I see the ghost of a chance for a footrace," frankly owned the giant sport, with a short, crisp laugh.

Several of the citizens drew a little back, ashamed of showing front against a single man, and he in a measure in captivity; but enough of the dangerous element remained to make the situation still critical on its face.

Carlos Houghton saw at much, and quickly added:

"Just give me half a show, gentlemen, and Peculiar shall have her neck-tie party, even yet!"

"She can have it right now, I reckon!" came a menacing voice from out that gathering. "You're a whaling big chump, but I reckon thar's a limb high 'nough fer to suit your length, come to try it on!"

Until now the Man of Muscle had not been able to exactly locate the peril, but now he smiled coldly, eyes fixed upon the gaunt fellow who so plainly put the growing sentiment into words.

"Ah, Slim Jimmy! I thought I recognized your melodious bazoo from the first, but now—may I drop a whisper into one of your fly-flappers before you begin fitting that same noose?"

"Wind's cheap, but killin's costly! Thar's pore Tom Hooper—"

"And right here's poor Carlos Houghton; just so!"

"Right thar', now, but what's to hender your gwine over yender, whar' Rod Church ought to've b'in by now? Whar' he would 'a' b'in, only fer you chippin' in 'thout leave nur license!"

"That's what's the matter, boys! And, I say, string up one, since we've lost the other!"

"We kin do it, too, jest as easy!"

Standing at ease, yet towering above all around him, Carlos Houghton looked and listened, his long mustaches curling upward as he smiled at the death confronting him, the very picture of cool and manly nerve.

Even grim old John Ironwood wore a frown of anxiety, but not so the man against whom all those vicious sentences were being flung in swift succession.

Never a word spoke he until a brief lull came, then his cool, measured tones were heard, and right to the point, too.

"Maybe you could bring off the hanging, gentlemen, but hardly without participating in a brisk little circus first. True, I'm only one man against a crowd, but—I'm all man, and quite old enough to fight for what I honestly claim is right."

"Was it right to help a bloody murderer cheat the rope?" harshly demanded Jerry Mixture, who seemed taking a peculiar interest in the matter, possibly because he had been one of the first to bring that crime to light.

"Don't put the cart before the horse, Jerry. I'm not so sure Rodney Church was—or is—that same assassin."

"Holy smoke! Next thing you'll try to claim that Whooping Tom shut off his own wind!"

A mixture of cries, derisive and menacing in equal parts, greeted this vicious fling, but again the giant sport showed his moderation just when it was most needed.

"Hardly that bad, Mr. Mixture. I'm willing to admit that poor Tom Hooper was killed, and it really looks like murder, too!"

"Will you hear to that, now! Isn't he kind, though?"

"I say it looks like murder," steadily persisted the sport, paying no further heed to those flings, "but, even yet I can't make it seem true that Church committed the crime. If he did—"

"Hasn't it all been proved up against him?"

"If he is really guilty, I promise to fetch him back to stand trial and pay the full penalty. If another did the deed, as

I now firmly believe will be proven to be the case, I'll run him down or lose my own life while trying!"

Carlos Houghton spoke with grave earnestness, and none who knew the nature of the man could for an instant doubt his perfect sincerity in giving this pledge.

But, the tide was not to be stemmed so easily, and there were still doubters who were only too ready to throw fresh obstacles in the way.

"All that sounds mighty nice, sport, but suppose you make a slip-up on it? What if you can't catch the unknown, and won't fetch the known?"

"Meaning Church, of course?"

"A blind man couldn't help seeing it that way—yes."

The Man of Muscle gave a low, easy laugh while looking into that frowning face, but then he lightly responded:

"I'll try to satisfy even a hog on two legs, pardner! If I fail to catch the real assassin, and can't give up the one you seem to think had a finger in this nasty pie—"

"Now you're coming to pay-dirt, sport!"

"Why, I'll simply walk up to the captain's office and pay scott. I will own up my fizzle and offer my own precious neck for the tie!"

Although everything was leading up to this statement, few within ear-shot really expected to receive such a dangerous pledge, and fewer still appeared to see in those words more than an empty boast.

Something of this feeling made itself both seen and heard just then, but John Ironwood lifted a bony hand as he harshly demanded quiet.

"This hain't no monkey-show, gents, nur yit a p'litical caucus. Jest hold your hush fer a bit, or take a walk!"

Both as man and official, the gaunt member was accustomed to rule, and comparative silence instantly fell over the assembly.

Turning that way, the Vigilante chief gazed keenly into the Man of Muscle's face for a few seconds, then slowly spoke:

"That sounds turrible foolish, Mr. Houghton, yit you look as though you raally meant it, too!"

"I do mean it, every syllable, Mr. Ironwood."

"You still think the kid never done up his pard, then?"

"I could take my oath that Rodney Church never cut Tom Hooper—yes!"

"In the face o' all these proofs o' his guilt?"

"All of which are purely circumstantial, and by no means conclusive of his guilt," stoutly persisted the giant sport. "Somebody killed him, of course, since a man couldn't well climb all over his own back. But I don't think Church did the deed, and I'm offering my neck as bail for his innocence."

"You reckon you kin show up jest who did do the killin', then?"

"If I'm granted free-foot and time enough—yes."

"How long a time do you ax fer, Mr. Houghton?"

A brief pause for thought, during which the sport seemed to be running over the facts in his mind and counting up the chances for and against himself; then he spoke, coolly enough?

"Make it one week, Mr. Ironwood. Surely that is little enough?"

"Long a-plenty to make a sneak out o' this kentry!" viciously called out one of the listeners.

Houghton flashed a contemptuous look that way, then he made quick retort:

"Another potato popgun exploded! But, don't you take too much for granted, Slim Jim Eberley. As a rule I let a skunk go his own way, but there are times and occasions when I deem it right to paralyze 'em. And just one more spray from your scent-box, Jimmy, will end in putting your hide on the fence!"

Turning more directly toward the chief of Vigilantes, Carlos Houghton spoke on in colder, sterner tones:

"I've given you my reasons for cheating the rope in this case, Mr. Ironwood, and, right or wrong, there's no need of further chin-music on that score. And as for the

rest, give me one week of grace from date, and if I don't fetch back a better subject for the neck-tie party, I'll offer myself as substitute."

"S'pose we don't keer to 'cept ary sech offer, though?"

"Then you can do the next thing!" retorted the Man of Muscle, as he stepped back a pace the better to handle his guns.

"You cain't fight the hull crowd, pardner."

"Maybe not; but we'll play I can," came the answer. "At the worst, I'll go up the flume in a blaze of red fire and heap big noise!"

"Now, one and all! I've got business over at the town. I'm going to start in that direction, whether I ever get there or not. And if I can't coax a path I'll do my level best to shoot one through!"

Clear and cold came this decision, bearing no trace of bluster, but sounding like pure and genuine business.

Fully two score armed men surrounded that spot, but Houghton showed not the faintest trace of fear or nervousness. His face was smiling, his movements smooth and easy, but there glittered a danger-signal in each scintillating eye as he began his steady march into what seemed the very jaws of death.

And such it might well have proved to be, for more than one "chief" barred the way, only for a swift but covert signal given them all by the Vigilante leader.

Plainly, as though couched in words, that signal read: "Wait!"

Not a shot was fired nor a blow struck on either side.

In grim silence the ranks opened as Houghton advanced, and he strode leisurely through that double line, still smiling, still the picture of power, the embodiment of matchless nerve.

He passed through the crowd and walked on toward the town, never looking back or betraying the slightest suspicion of foul play now that his guns no longer held the drop.

For reasons which John Ironwood alone perfectly understood, no steps were taken to hinder that masterly retreat, and the giant spotter reached Peculiar without further trouble.

This was far better than he had hoped for when he made that bold dash to save a menaced life; but, judging from his face alone, Houghton felt neither elation nor marvel that he had succeeded so well in that audacious bluff.

That face was grave and even troubled now, and the light in his dark gray eyes shone in sympathy with that unspoken anxiety.

Houghton headed direct for the principal hotel of which the mining town of Peculiar could then boast, but before he quite reached the building he caught sight of Uncle 'Lias Perkins just emerging from its front.

The graybeard sighted the sport at that same instant, and came hastily forward to meet him, speaking huskily when near enough:

"Lord! It's good fer sore eyes, sir, jest to see you hyar, 'thout a durn rope round your thrapple! Fer that's what I stood ready fer to bet double odds would be the outcome of it all!"

"My time hasn't come, you see, Uncle 'Lias," lightly spoke the big sport, then adding, in altered tones: "The young lady? She didn't— She's all right, Perkins?"

"Wal, sir, that's a hard one to talk up to," frankly admitted the veteran. "But, she's all alive, anyway, an' she done sent me out to hunt you up in a holy hurry, too!"

CHAPTER XII.

BOLD KNIGHT AND FAIR LADY.

"To look me up?"

"That's what's the matter, boss! Said she couldn't rest noways easy ontel she knowed you wasn't none the wuss off fer savin' the kid. An' so— I'll pilot ye clean thar', pardner!"

But the Man of Muscle showed no eager haste to avail himself of that frank offer.

"Wait, Uncle 'Lias. You say the young lady merely wished to be certain that her brother escaped, of course?"

"More'n that, an' in big gobs, too!"

stoutly declared the graybeard. "She said I was to fetch you thar', so's she could thank you fer all you done to help the kid out o' his nasty hobble, an' fer her, back thar' when Cap'n Clutch an' his Crooks—Lord, boss! Ef she tackles the hull job from start to finish, con-darned ef she'll git over thankin' ye this 'dential night, aryhaw!"

"Then I reckon we'd better let the job out, Uncle 'Lias. You can report that I took a sneak, and so—"

"No, ye don't, now!" exploded the prospector, fastening to an arm as though he suspected actual flight. "She's a plum' lady, an' what a lady says goes as it lays! So—come, now!"

Laughing easily, the Man of Muscle yielded without further demur, the two men walking over to the hotel under whose roof the sister of Rodney Church had sought temporary shelter.

Just before crossing that threshold, Houghton added:

"I'll pay Miss Church a visit, since she asks it, but not until I've been to my room and taken a clean-up. As you can see, pardner, there's plenty need of it, too!"

"But—you won't try to make a sneak of it, boss?"

"No. You can stand guard if you like. Or maybe you'd better let the lady know I'm coming shortly."

The sport hurried up to his chamber, there briskly renovating himself so far as water and a partial change of apparel went.

Busy as were his hands, his brain was working still more swiftly.

"Shall I tell her the whole truth, or ought I to smooth it over with a few lies?"

This was the debatable point which worried the Man of Muscle during those few minutes, and he had not fully made up his mind when he left his chamber to join the waiting prospector at the foot of the stairs.

By this time it was fairly dusk, and the scent of supper filled the hotel from top to bottom; but neither Houghton nor Perkins gave feeding a thought just then.

"She's expectin' of ye, sir," whispered Uncle 'Lias, a broad grin spreading over his honest countenance as the big sport came his way.

"All right. Lead the way, will you? And—maybe you'd just as well back me up in what I may have to tell her; understand?"

"You bet your sweet life!"

In common with all places of that description, this hotel had its "parlor" on the ground floor, and to this room Uncle 'Lias briskly led the way, first rapping softly at the closed door, then coughing painfully, at last turning the knob with a creak and a rattle quite sufficient to put a blind, deaf and sleeping body wholly on guard.

Miss Church greeted the couple, her face very pale, and yet wearing traces of grief and terror.

Uncle 'Lias had prepared an elaborate introduction to do the occasion justice, but he was the only one who heard much of it.

The maiden was too deeply agitated to listen, and seemed only desirous of showing how intensely grateful she was for all that this bold stranger had done for her and hers that day, while Carlos Houghton preferred to pass that over as quickly as might be.

"I merely did what I deemed my duty, Miss Church, and I beg that you will let it go at that," he quickly, gravely interposed, holding her trembling hands firmly, and evading her essayed kiss upon the hands that had served her so gallantly.

Leading her back to a seat, Carlos took a chair opposite, near enough to make easy talking, then at once plunged into the midst of the awkward subject, rightly deeming an introductory worse than kindness.

"It's an ugly situation, Miss Church; still, it might be far worse," was his assurance, to begin with. "Your brother is free now, and I have won a full week in which to clear up this affair and prove him guiltless of all wrong."

"Oh, sir, if you only can!"

"I have full faith that I can do just

that, Miss Church," declared the Wild West cavalier, possibly stretching the truth a trifle in his natural desire to lend comfort to this charming sufferer. "And you can help me not a little in bringing light forth from darkness, I think, too."

"I can? Oh, sir, only show me how! Only let me do—even so little—something for poor Rodney!"

"You shall play your part through it all, never fear, Miss Church, and we'll come out victorious in the end."

"You bet your ole socks!" enthusiastically burst forth Uncle 'Lias; and then clapped hand over mouth after the uncouth expression had found full utterance.

Houghton choked back a bit of a chuckle at that slip, and hastily spoke on, while poor Perkins blushed like any shamed schoolboy.

"I believe it's nothing more or less than a vile scheme to get full possession of the New Find, a valuable mine in which your brother held a half-interest, Miss Church."

"I firmly believe that Tom Hooper was killed by one or more of the gang interested in that scheme, and I just as firmly hold faith in my ability to run down the criminals and fully expose their black deeds."

Eagerly Iva listened, and eagerly she clasped those strong hands with her slender fingers, looking into those gray eyes with her deep blue orbs as she spoke with passionate earnestness:

"Oh, if you only can! If you only may, Mr. Houghton! Prove them gunny, and show all the world how innocent my poor brother is, and—Do all that, sir, and no reward will be too great for your services."

A sudden glow came into those gray eyes, and for a brief space they looked deep into Iva's; then the sport slowly spoke:

"Any reward I may ask, Miss Church? Do you really mean just that?"

A quick wave of color swept into that lovely face, and those long lashes drooped, but only for the space which might be measured by an ordinary breath.

Then, still with hands joined to his, still with her cheeks softly mantled, eyes met eyes, and the maiden spoke in lowered tones:

"Yes; nothing will be too good for you then, Mr. Houghton."

That gaze lasted for a half score seconds longer, and they were still eye to eye when the Man of Muscle repeated:

"Any reward I may pray for, Miss Church? You really mean just that?"

"Any reward; I mean just that!"

Too low for even the keen ears of Uncle 'Lias as he sat beaming upon the couple across the room, but Carlos Houghton heard every syllable of that answer, and there was a glow of almost fierce triumph in his gray orbs as he bent to let a light kiss drop upon those trembling hands before releasing them.

Instead of flinching or turning away in mock modesty, Iva bravely met that glowing gaze, earnestly speaking in her turn:

"You not only risked your life to rescue me, a complete stranger, this day from those dreadful robbers, Mr. Houghton, but, more: you saved the life of my dear brother when never another hand was lifted to avert that shameful death! Now, clear his name, his honor, and ask of me what you wish—it shall not be denied you!"

"Thank you," simply responded the sport; then speaking in different tones: "And now, Miss Church, even at the risk of seeming inhospitable, I must tell you just this:

"Peculiar is no place for you, under present circumstances. Your brother can't well join you here, and—"

"Where is he now, please, sir?"

A brief hesitation, then the sport shook his head.

"In safety, I have full faith, Miss Church, but I can't tell you anything more definitely. For one thing, what you don't know you can't let accidentally drop where the ears of enemies might catch and twist it to fresh evil. So, pray don't press that point!"

"If you assure me he is safe, sir—"

"He surely is if he trusted to my horse,"

came the swift assurance. "Of course I couldn't explain, under the circumstances, but that was one reason why I left Rodney's arms bound. I might have taken time to cut them loose, but, so hampered, he would give the horse freer swing."

Iva looked wistfully, yet refrained from asking more light. And the sport nodded his approval with a friendly smile, then spoke on:

"You don't want to worry over all that, my dear lady, for everything is sure to run along smoothly after the fair start we've taken."

"I'm going after the lad, as soon as I can give our too inquisitive friends here in Peculiar the slip, and you can safely count on hearing good news the next time I bring or send in a report."

"And, I am to wait here, Mr. Houghton?"

"For the present, yes. The landlord is white, and will treat you to the best his house affords. And Uncle 'Lias—well, after the sample you've seen I hardly need tell you he's pure gold!"

"Good Lawd!" fairly exploded the graybeard, blushing furiously.

"That's all right, Perkins, and anything less would be slander," the Man of Muscle lightly said, then adding: "I won't keep you longer now, Miss Church, but try to believe that all will go well."

"If I only could!"

"You must—simply must!" almost sternly repeated the sport, yet with an unusually mild glow in his keen eyes, as they rested upon that fair face. "I'll go pick the youngster up and take him to a safe place where he can wait for the clouds to roll by."

"When I've done that, I'll come back here and let you know what comes next. Until then, please keep quiet, and don't see any strangers unless the landlord or Uncle 'Lias is in your company. You promise?"

"I promise all you ask, Mr. Houghton," gravely said the maiden, once more clasping his bronzed hands and looking up into his eyes.

Carlos bent lower as though he meant to drop a kiss on brow or on lips, but, resisting temptation, he touched her hand with his mustaches, then turned and left the room like one who flees from a dangerous enemy rather than parts from a warm friend!

Uncle 'Lias followed quickly, but to all seeming the Man of Muscle felt in no particularly confidential humor just then, for he hurried on to the long, bare-looking dining-room, there taking a seat and partaking of the plentiful, if rather coarsely served, viands with a never-failing appetite.

After making a hearty meal, Carlos Houghton left both table and room, going up to his chamber as though retiring for the night, but in reality that was a move to escape the inconvenient questioning which honest Perkins was fairly burning to begin.

"He means everything for the best, of course, and is as honest as the day is long, but—preserve me just now!"

It was well after dark when Carlos Houghton left his room, passing downstairs and out through the little side door in preference to running the gantlet of the office habitants just then.

Naturally expecting something of the sort after what had that afternoon happened, Houghton had hardly left the hotel ere he felt morally certain that his movements were being watched, his steps being dogged.

Walking briskly on for some little time in order to make sure, he turned a corner, then sharply doubled back, to meet his follower fairly face to face.

That follower, if such he really was, recoiled with a muffled exclamation, his hand dropping to a weapon as he did so.

CHAPTER XIII.

A BAD MAN TO SHADOW.

"Have you lost anything, pardner?" asked Carlos Houghton, touching no weapon himself, yet never more wholly on guard than while seemingly so careless.

"Look out, you!"

"Just what I am doing, Mr. Kellar,"

came the cool retort, as the sport recognized his man, none other than he who had so audaciously appropriated Captain Clutch's horse that afternoon. "I never could bear to have another fellow treading on my poor heels, and so—eh?"

The Peculiar sport shrank back like one who more than half-anticipated clutch or stroke, his hand still on his weapon, but without actually drawing his gun.

"I'm not hunting a row, Carlos Houghton, but if I'm crowded—"

"Merely looking for your own, eh? Well, although they do say it's 'finders keepers' out in this wooden country, I reckon—take better care of it hereafter, Mr. Kellar, or you may see trouble—in recovering your loss, I mean, of course!"

As he spoke, the Man of Muscle held forth a hand, on the palm of which shone a bit of jewelry, and before Hugh Kellar could fairly realize just what was meant, the lost sleeve-button was again in his possession, while the giant horseman was saying:

"I'll wait for my thanks until pay-day rolls 'round, my dear fellow, and until then—just one word by way of friendly warning."

"Don't play shadow to a man of my build until you mean business clear up to the hilt."

Without pausing for retort or reply, Houghton turned and strode on, leaving the gambler to make what he might out of that doubly-pointed warning.

Although he was by no means so confident now as he had at first been, that Hugh Kellar was playing spy over his movements, the sport kept on the keen alert, for he felt pretty certain fab would be kept on his movements if possible, at least until this Whooping Tom affair was satisfactorily settled.

"They'll look for me to follow up the kid, and it's dollars to doughnuts they'll hit my trail in force if I try that on. So—keep your eyes peeled, old man, or there'll be another slip-up marked against your score! And—those glorious blue eyes will grow dim with hope deferred!"

Those same lovely orbs seemed shining before him just then, and the giant rider gave rather more of his thoughts to eyes and owner than was wholly prudent under existing circumstances.

"Any reward—anything I may ask, is it?" he mused, with a smile curiously sweet for that stern face. "She couldn't know—and yet, didn't she guess?"

It was no part of his plans to leave town just then, or after such an open fashion, and so the sport turned before reaching the edge of the collection of buildings, and just when he was least expecting such an encounter, he once more came face to face with Hugh Kellar.

To all seeming, the gambler was looking for Houghton, for he spoke abruptly, without preface, as he barred the way:

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Houghton, but I really can't understand just what you meant, a bit ago. This button—"

"Belongs to you, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but—"

"All right. You lost it, I found it. Saying nothing of the taste displayed in the ornament, 'tis valuable from a monetary point of view, and so—just credit my account with the amount you would have spent in advertising your loss."

"I don't wish—"

"Never mind, my dear fellow. I'm rich enough to scorn a penny or two, once in a while. Sorry I can't return your lead as well as your gold, though!"

"Lead? What are you trying to get at, Houghton? Is it an insult?"

A low, easy chuckle came from those mustached lips as the gambler instinctively recoiled a pace, much as a man might who looks for blow to closely follow words.

Instead, the Man of Muscle stood carelessly at ease, hands resting lightly on hips, as he spoke again:

"Do you really wish to know just that, Mr. Kellar?"

"Of course I do, but—"

"Well, I mean considerably more than I've said, as yet, but the day is coming fast when I can let my tongue wag more freely. Until then—don't burn your fin-

gers, and practice on shooting at the bigness of a well-grown man from cover!"

Letting fall this thinly-veiled threat and warning combined, the centaur passed on like one scorning further precautions against such an adversary.

Hugh Kellar caught his breath so sharply that it sounded more like a venomous hiss, and his revolver leaped forth, the muzzle rising almost in a line with that shapely back.

If the Man of Muscle had turned, or even cast a look backward, the odds are great that Peculiar would have had another sensation, but that very carelessness or recklessness seemed to paralyze that itching forefinger, and instead of pulling trigger the gambler lowered and replaced his weapon, muttering execrations which were none the less vicious because subdued.

If Carlos Houghton suspected aught of all this, he gave no visible sign, leisurely continuing his stroll through town, now and then giving nod of recognition or word of greeting as he met acquaintances, looking all over the man of leisure, yet somehow discouraging any attempt to engage him in talk or discussion.

Once or twice he crossed the threshold of saloon or dance house, just as a man might who had far more time to kill than he well knew what to do with; but there, as on the street, something in his coolly reserved demeanor hindered others from crowding upon him.

Outwardly all carelessness and indifference, Carlos Houghton was in truth never more keenly on the alert in his life than just then.

He intended making good the pledge given to Iva Church. He meant to leave Peculiar in quest of Rodney Church long ere the crack of dawn. He believed that feat could be performed, even after fairly satisfying himself that his every movement was being watched.

No need to ask himself who the spies were, or what their object.

That was self-evident, after the happenings of that evening.

"The Vigilantes are at the bottom of it all, I reckon," his musings ran as he strolled onward once more. "It bites 'em to even think of playing fair; they'd heap sight rather go by crooks and curves!"

"All right, my covies! You and I for it, and we'll see which end of the teeter-board kicks highest!"

Having fairly decided upon his course of action, Houghton paid no further visits to the saloons, but quickened his pace perceptibly, at the same time steering clear of artificially lighted spots, crouching a bit as a fellow instinctively will while essaying to escape notice or give some enemy the slip.

Making more than one turn and crook as though suspecting shadows at work, the Man of Muscle took precious good care to avoid making the very discovery he seemed to seek; then, like one satisfied he had thrown off all spies, he headed more directly for the open country.

The stage road lay to the north, while this course led toward the east, in the direction of the river, but there stood the low-railed road-bridge, and nothing could be easier than to make a bend after once crossing, if he really intended striking the trail of the fugitive miner.

There was nothing, then, in his choice of direction to alarm or disgust his shadows, and the Man of Muscle strode on, now fairly outside of the town, without a doubt as to their hanging close to his heels, at least until his course should be positively marked out.

Just as a man will when satisfied he has no further trouble to apprehend from that quarter, Houghton pressed on without looking back, and crossed that bridge without hesitation.

But the instant his feet left the last plank on that side, a swift change came over the sport-Hercules, and in place of keeping straight on, as one would naturally expect, he crouched low down in the dense shade cast by a clump of trees, showing his teeth in a grim smile as he looked back.

He saw a couple of shadows coming his way, bending low, and each one keeping

close to a railing for the better cover there afforded, and not until the spies were almost within arm's length did he rise up from ambush, stepping briskly forward to meet them, while speaking blandly:

"Good-evening, gentlemen! Hope I see ye, both?"

At least he saw them flinch and recoil, drawing toward each other as though feeling the need of mutual support.

They were clearly taken all aback, and though each one muttered something, its meaning was far from clear, even to that cool-head.

"I reckoned 'twas you, Richard, and you, Mixture, but—let me tell you one weenty thing, and that is just this:

"You're going the wrong way to work, gentlemen! You're entirely too hot on the scent, so—cool off, you dirty whelps!"

Swift as thought, and resistless as fate, the Man of Muscle sprang forward and clutched the two disconcerted spies, giving a wrench and a twist, then a mighty heave, in spite of their startled cries and frantic struggles.

Lifted clear off their feet, the knaves were tossed headlong over the low railing, awkwardly pitching downward to plunge into the deep pool lying there below.

It was a marvelous exhibition of what trained muscle can do, and the giant spotter laughed lightly as he gazed after his discomfited enemies for a moment or two before resuming his journey.

He saw the ruffians come to the surface, kicking and striking out awkwardly, but he knew that Dick Whiffler and Jerry Mixture were not too badly stunned or crippled to help themselves, and so passed on without compunction.

"Who set them on my track? John Ironwood? Hardly that, for neither cur belongs to the Vigilantes. They train more with Kellar's gang, but he— Well, time will tell all things, I reckon!"

Satisfied now that he had no further shadows to take thought for, Houghton shifted his course to match his business, then made marvelously rapid progress for one who spent pretty heavily on his horse and the saddle.

It was a long as well as a difficult trip, thanks to the broken lay of the ground; but the Man of Muscle had sufficient incentive to urge him on, and mile after mile was placed behind him without pause or murmur.

On one point he felt no doubt whatever; his good horse would be found just where counted upon, but how about the young fellow who had been despatched upon that some journey?

"If I could have dropped a word of warning, or if he only has solid sense enough to cipher it all out for himself," mused the big fellow, as he at last drew near that retreat. "But—has he? That's the question right now!"

A question which would soon be decided, for or against his wishes, since now less than half a mile remained to be crossed, and that was but a trifle to those long and active legs.

When near enough for his purpose, Houghton lifted his finger to his lips and blew a long, peculiar blast, then bent his head in listening.

"I knew it," he muttered, with a glow of triumph in his eyes as he caught a clear nicker coming from no great distance, followed by the quick trampling of iron-shod hoofs. "That's Chief, but—the kid?"

The good horse came trotting up to greet his loved master with a loving muzzle, but there were no signs of Rodney Church, nor could Houghton win response to his cheery calls as he moved forward once more.

Where was Rodney Church? What had happened to the young miner?

CHAPTER XIV.

A NIGHT OF TORTURE.

It was like one in a grim and hideous nightmare dream when Rodney Church felt himself swung into saddle and sent away on the back of good Chief, the pet steed of the Man of Muscle.

It is more than likely that the terrible beating to which he was subjected by his drunken partner in the New Find partially or temporarily affected his brain, for

certain it is that he acted through all that sore trial more like an imbecile than one of sound brain and cool reason.

And it was more instinct than reason that led him to stick fast to the saddle, cramping his legs and making them do double duty since his arms were helpless through being bound behind his back.

The poor fellow was stunned by his awful misfortunes, and another heavy shock had been given him by the untimely coming on the scene of his sister, Iva.

Taking all together, then, Rodney was little better than an inanimate burden for Chief to convey whither he willed just then.

The horse knew what was expected of him by his master, and lost no time in carrying out those wishes.

He swung around the point of rocks, then headed as directly as was possible for the faraway retreat lying deep up in those rugged hills.

There were no signs of hasty pursuit, but neither horse nor rider took note of that just then. The one sped on, the other bowed lower over the nail-studded pommel in an effort to maintain his balance, brain reeling and whirling, wits all in a jumble, heart fairly sick within him.

For mile after mile Chief maintained that steady gallop, turning and twisting as the lay of the ground demanded, yet ever heading as directly as possible for yonder snug retreat.

Little by little the fugitive rallied both in mind and in body, finally sitting more erect and looking anxiously around through the deepening night.

So far as his eyes or his ears could bear witness, no pursuit was being made, yet his uneasiness deepened as he failed to recognize his present whereabouts, and the speeding horse refused to obey his voice when he tried to call a halt.

Instead, Chief let out a fresh link, speeding on through gloom and among rocks with what seemed suicidal recklessness, paying no attention to his rider, bent only on carrying to completion the orders of its beloved master, the Man of Muscle.

Half believing he was astride a bewitched creature, Rodney felt tempted more than once to risk a drop out of the saddle, but as often Chief would quicken his pace, or the young fellow would see fresh peril to neck or limb, and refrain for the time being.

He tried all he knew to break or slip his bonds, but in vain. Sure hands had done the work, and so far he was just as helpless now as he had been while surrounded by that yelling, cursing, maddened mob, rope around his neck, and but a few brief seconds between life and death!

And so that strange flight went on, hour after hour, mile piling on mile, until it seemed to the tortured fugitive that the confines of this wide world must soon be reached.

It was well along in the evening when, with a low, glad whicker, Chief came to a halt for the first time since speeding out from under the death-tree of Peculiar, tossing his head impatiently as he looked back at his rider.

Dizzy, confused, feeling far from his usual self, Rodney yet had wit enough in store to alight, tripping over a loose stone and falling at full length before he could recover himself.

With another whimper, Chief trotted away, vanishing from the young miner's sight amidst the gloom.

For a brief space Church lay where he had fallen, shivering in every fiber, a prey to his mental torments none the less because his life-lease had so unexpectedly been lengthened.

Those terrible cries were still ringing in his ears. He could still see those menacing weapons, those clinched and shaking hands, those grimly horrible scowls, one and all of which joined in branding him a foul and cowardly assassin!

"I never—God knows I never killed poor Tom!" he huskily groaned, hiding his face and covering his eyes as he groveled there in the gloom, shivering like a storm-tossed leaf.

But, as the minutes slowly crept on without making those fancied sounds any

clearer or fetching his imaginary pursuers to fasten their grip upon his nearly helpless limbs once more, the poor fellow gradually rallied.

That took time, for Rodney had suffered far more than words may tell; but little by little his brain steadied, his scattered wits came back, his nerves quieted in a measure, and he sat up, staring into the surrounding darkness as he sought to puzzle it all out.

For a time he could think of naught save the awful vision of his murdered pard—bloody, fire scarred, so awfully still and silent!

Then, like a flash of sunshine across a black cloud, came the face of his sister, Iva, and with a painful catch in his breath the fugitive started to his feet, pausing with a fierce groan as he vainly strove to extend his arms in brotherly protection.

More than anything else this steadied the young fellow, and once more he strove hard to either break or slip those bonds. Now, as before, he failed, but the mere struggle helped to clear his brain, and groping around in the gloom, he soon found what he wished.

Kneeling down with his back toward a boulder, Rodney began sawing his bonds up and down over a sharp edge of the rock, working with almost frantic energy, pausing at brief intervals again to test the cords.

After half an hour's work success crowned his efforts, and a glad cry escaped his lips as he felt the thongs yield, then give way with an audible snap!

A moment later the bits were shaken off and he stood erect, a free man once more!

True, he was without the slightest weapon with which to fight for his sister or to defend his own life when menaced, as it surely would be the moment he was seen by any one from Peculiar; but without thought for himself Rodney moved away, as nearly as he could guess, in the direction of the town.

An over-strained fancy told him his loved sister was in imminent peril, and he felt it his duty to lose no time in hurrying to her assistance.

Only, which was the right course to follow?

Where lay Peculiar?

His first impetuous rush slackened, then ceased altogether as he stared around him in bewilderment, vainly striving to locate himself, time and again brushing hand across his aching eyes as though that could clear away the mists which clouded his poor brain just then.

The stars were still shining brightly, although the East was beginning to pale before the coming day. It was easy enough for even him to settle upon the points of the compass, but of what avail that knowledge, while he was ignorant of the direction taken by Chief when fleeing with his nearly unconscious burden from the death-tree of Peculiar?

And so, going purely by guess, and vainly striving to maintain a direct course across that terribly rough and broken stretch of country, Rodney Church kept on and on, slackening pace only when his overtaken limbs threatened to fail him.

Then, when it seemed as though the poor fellow was at the point of collapse through physical exhaustion, a fresh terror was sprung upon him.

The far-off howl of a mountain wolf came floating upon the early morning air, plain enough to one whose wits were in normal condition, but to that highly-wrought brain 'twas the hideous yell of a lynching mob, and, screaming aloud in frantic fright, Rodney Church broke into blind flight, running crazily through the darkness among those rugged rocks and scrubby vegetation, only with one thought—to cheat the shameful noose which he had done naught to merit.

On, and still on, blinded, gasping, each breath hot as it came from his laboring lungs, each moment a living death!

On without reason or reckoning, chased by a myriad of phantoms born of a temporarily diseased brain, every sound changed to death-yells, every obstacle representing an armed demon striking at his life.

And then, catching his foot in a trailing vine, Rodney plunged blindly forward, striking the hard earth so heavily that breath and sense were knocked out of him, and he lay like one claimed by death.

The night had passed and broad day had taken its place ere the fugitive from an unmerited doom began to rally from his awkward fall.

A groan, a feeble movement of arms and legs, and then a slight shiver as his eyes opened a trifle, but closing again as though too feeble to bear the bright glare of yonder unclouded sun.

What had happened? Why was he feeling so stiff, so sore, so—so dreadfully old?

Then, after a bit, the fugitive made another and stronger effort, finally raising himself to a sitting posture, clasping his aching head with both hands as he stared dazedly around him.

All rocks, scrubby bushes, desolation! Surely—Ha!

Rodney gave a sharp, gasping cry, as certain sounds came to his ears, and in part banished those bewildering mists of uncertainty.

Surely those were cries of men, like himself? And yet, why were they so fierce, so bloodcurdling? And what made him shiver so like a leaf, when—God above!

With a choking cry the hunted miner sprang to his feet, glaring around with widely-distended eyes until he caught sight of a number of armed men hurrying his way! And—yes!

"Hyar he is, lads!" came a loud shout from one of those ominous shapes as it headed that way in hot haste. "Whooray fer our side! Hyar he is, an I'm gwine fer to—Han's up, blame ye, Rod Church!"

Instead, the fugitive turned and rushed away in utter desperation, for the horrid truth now came back to him, and he felt that capture meant death by the hangman's noose!

"Never, you demons!" he cried, hoarsely, as he fled. "Kill me if you like, but never alive—never alive, ye devils from hell!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE MAN OF MUSCLE ON THE TRAIL.

When no answer came to his repeated calls, Carlos Houghton moved forward, in anything rather than a joyous mood.

Of course there was still a chance of finding Rodney Church where he hoped, but that chance was an exceedingly slender one now.

Thoroughly familiar with those surroundings, the Man of Muscle made a few swift circles, at brief intervals calling aloud on the young miner to show up, that a friend was calling; but no answer came, and, thanks to the darkness which still reigned, he found no clew until Chief came to his aid.

"What is it, boy?" asked Houghton, as that knowing creature rubbed up against his shoulder, then tossing his head directly in front of his master. "If that idiot had only a weenty bit of your solid horse-sense—Hello, old man!"

For another shake of that head caused an object to flap across the sport's face, and, grasping the piece of rope, Houghton instantly divined at least a portion of the truth.

"His bonds, for ducats! Then—who helped him shake 'em off?"

Running his fingers over the ends gave him a bit further light, and the aid of a match or two did the rest. Houghton saw that the rope had been worn in two, and with that as a starting point, he was not long in finding the very rock against which Rodney Church had freed himself.

"Well, it might be worse," mused the sport, standing there in the night to weigh the altered situation. "He might have fallen into the clutches of some of those howling ropeites and—but how much better off will the poor fool be out here, lost in the hills, unarmed, every man's hand against him?"

"If it wasn't for the little lady—Heaven bless her!—I'd come mighty nigh calling myself an infernal bungler for not letting the Vigilantes make a clean job of it over yonder!"

Of course, the Man of Muscle hardly

meant all his disparted mutterings covered, although he was both sorry and angry. Only for this fresh complication he could have kept his pledge to Iva Church so surely, so speedily.

"Well, there's little use in going off at half-cock, I reckon, so—come, Chief! We'll have a bit of lunch and then catch our forty winks while there's time and opportunity, old pard."

Thanks to his provident foresight, there was no difficulty about the first portion of that programme, and from his cunningly-contrived cache Houghton took what he cared to eat, then curled himself up for a welcome sleep, knowing that he could do little or nothing at the trail until the day should fairly dawn, so far as his own skill was concerned.

A whispered word or two seemed to set the good steed on guard-duty, and feeling well assured that no person, friend or enemy, could come within danger distance of his rude couch without ample notice, the giant centaur dropped off into a sound slumber.

That sleep covered barely an hour, and the dawn was still lacking when the tall fellow roused himself, rising to an elbow for a slow, comprehensive look around on every side.

That was nothing more than ordinary prudence, however, for he had neither heard nor seen aught suspicious, and Chief was giving a low, glad whimper such as would never find birth if danger was lurking nigh.

"Augh-yaugh!" yawned the Hercules, as he gave a mighty stretch after yielding to instinct so far. "I'd give a big round dollar to turn over and curl up in a knot for another snooze, but—business, Chief!"

The Man of Muscle sprang lightly erect, stretching his arms and legs, shaking his head and torso, expanding his chest with long draughts of the early morning air, all of which seemed to serve him as both tonic and food for the occasion.

"Now we'll see whether or no you're worth your keep, old boy," Carlos said, talking to his four-footed companion much as a man might to a mate of his own species. "Just take a weenty smell of that, please, and make up your mind while I'm stocking up the provision chamber."

That same cache supplied his wants once more, and taking a sufficient quantity of food along for Rodney as well as himself, the Man of Muscle called to Chief and without further delay got under way.

Then it was that, for the uncounted time, the horse exhibited his marvelous intelligence, plainly comprehending what was wanted of him, smelling of those bare rocks for a little, then starting ahead through the gloom with a low, eager whimper.

"He's taken the scent, by glory!" exclaimed Houghton, exultantly, highly elated by this fresh proof of Chief's rare utility. "If I was to tell just this, they'd swear I was a born liar, and had been improving every day since."

Yet it was the naked truth.

Houghton had given the horse the severed rope to smell of and chew upon, hardly hoping that he would be of real benefit in following the trail of the fugitive miner, yet—what was this?

With only an occasional pause to smell and nuzzle the bare stones here and there, Chief led the way onward, plainly following a trail of some description; and before they had covered quite a mile, Houghton was fully satisfied that they were on the right scent.

Then they came to a narrow stretch of ground which was far more favorable for tracking, and halting Chief, the Man of Muscle lit several matches in quick succession, carefully examining the ground, only giving over when fully satisfied that Rodney Church had crossed right there some time during the night now nearly spent.

"Good boy, Chief!" caressed the sport, by way of passing reward. "You are a corker, for sure! And—when I tell yonder little lady what you have been doing this night—say, a year from now, when

my work is done up to the queen's taste, and Tom Hooper can rest easy in his grave, and Rodney Church can hold up his head with the best, and Iva—ah, Chief! Just think of that, old fellow! She'll pat and caress you! She may even—but, no! I love you harder than a mule can kick frozen pumpkins up the side of a barn, pardner, but I draw the line right there!

"If there's any kissing going on, I'm doing it up for the whole family, remember!"

With a low, half-abashed chuckle at his own conceit, Carlos Houghton once more gave the bright equine word to go ahead, and again they followed that erratic trail through the brightening dawn.

When the day was fairly born, Houghton himself took up the work so wonderfully performed by the horse, and finding how surely they had kept to that line of flight, he spent several minutes in studying the various peculiarities presented by those signs.

"Poor devil!" he muttered, as he saw how blindly the fugitive must have been racing across that difficult stretch of country. "His trouble has turned him crazy, or else—could he have been chased, I wonder?"

That took some little time to decide, but then Houghton knew no worse enemy than that a distorted fancy had been driving poor Rodney on through the night, and with grave eyes and troubled thoughts he pressed along the trail, trying to hope, yet forced to dread the worst.

"Crazy as a loon," was his decision. "He must have been racing like a blind man, judging from the tracks. And—How will it end?"

His thoughts turned back to that lovely face, those trusting eyes, and as he recalled the pledge he had given, Carlos Houghton frowned more darkly than ever.

"If I fail to find him—or, finding, fail to save—how can I ever face her again?"

For something like another mile the trail was followed without pause or break, then Houghton came to an abrupt halt, giving vent to a muttered sound, which certainly savored of an oath.

His keen gray eyes were now fixed upon a slender column of black smoke rising from beyond a high mass of rugged rocks, too dark for a regular camp fire, too regular for anything save a signal.

From whom, for whom?

Quickly making up his mind, the Man of Muscle hurried on without paying further attention to the trail for the time being, leaving Chief at the base of yonder rugged pile, up which he climbed with goat-like activity and sureness of foot.

It took but a couple of minutes to win a perch from whence he could command an extensive view of the country beyond, and, guided by that smoke-signal, Houghton lost little time in learning what he was trying for.

It a comparatively open space that fire found birth, and close at hand he noticed a small group of living objects; horses for certain, and—yes!

With another half-smothered oath, the giant spotter sport brought forth a small, but powerful glass, which he quickly trained upon yonder distant group, catching breath sharply as he made an important discovery.

He made out at least two men standing near that fire, feeding the flames with half-dry grass to keep up that dense column of smoke. And, not far away he saw a prostrate shape, which he knew must be none other than Rodney Church.

"They've got him, but—dead or living? And—gathering like so many hungry vultures to a feast of carrion."

For his keen gaze swept around, catching sight of several horsemen heading toward yonder smoke-signal, plainly called toward that spot by the men who had captured yonder poor wretch.

With a low, grating growl, the Man of Muscle put up his glass and beat a swift retreat the way he had come, making all possible haste in reaching his good steed.

"Maybe it's too late! Maybe it's an-

other unlucky devil!" his busy thoughts ran as he sprang into the saddle and set Chief in motion, heading as directly as possible for yonder fire.

"If there was only time to take a cool look before closing in, but that's out of the question unless—Steady, boy! We've got our work cut out for us, now, and maybe we'll bite off more than we can chew!"

Houghton rode at top speed until drawing near the scene of interest, then slackened pace in a measure to make his final preparations.

He drew rein when near enough to see yonder men, and gave a sharp click of his strong teeth as he recognized them.

"Ironwood's men, both! And—I knew it!" as he saw Rodney Church lying a little to one side, bonds on arms and ankles, yet lying so motionless that he could hardly pronounce him living rather than dead.

He heard the Vigilantes shout and wave their hands toward their approaching mates, and knew that whatever he did must be done quickly.

"If 'twas only the kid alone, it'd hardly be worth the cost," was his grim musing as he settled himself firmly in the saddle and gathered up the loose-lying reins once more.

"But—there's Iva, bless her glorious eyes! For her sake, then, and trust to luck for the rest of it."

Precious though each moment was, Houghton took time for a cool and clear look over the field of action.

He saw that he could draw much closer to the captors of the young miner without too great a risk of premature discovery, and at once headed his horse in that direction, a whispered warning causing Chief to walk almost without sound.

Then, halting again when as near the signal-fire as practicable, the Man of Muscle took a final look over the field of action.

As yet no other of the searching force had reached that spot, although he could both hear their shouts and see their shapes at no very great distance.

The two Vigilantes were standing with backs turned his way, still unsuspecting of his presence, and so offering an easier triumph.

"It'll never be better than right now, though I'd like to be sure as to the kid. Alive or croaked? If the last—but that'll show up in the end, so—git thar', Eli!"

Then he charged from cover at full speed upon the Vigilantes.

CHAPTER XVI.

CHEATING THE HUMAN HOUNDS.

Chief took at least half a score of mighty strides before the clatter of hoofs upon the flinty soil gave warning of that charge, and as the startled Vigilantes wheeled with cries of angry surprise, the Man of Muscle gave a wild cheer, looking doubly gigantic as he fairly swooped down upon his prey.

One of the fellows managed to jerk out a gun and fire a single shot, but he had no time for taking aim and his lead flew widely astray.

Then, with a reckless laugh, the giant centaur closed in, sending Chief directly between the two men, his mighty grip fastening upon their collars and jerking them into the air as he swayed in the saddle to partly turn his good steed.

"Go scratch your maddest spots, gentlemen!" the Man of Muscle cried, in grim mockery, as he swung his human prey around dizzily, then cast both headlong into a dense clump of briars and prickly pears.

Angry yells came to his ears, now, and he saw the other Vigilantes pricking up their horses and rushing to the rescue; but with another reckless laugh he partly wheeled, bending low in the saddle and catching up that bound shape from the stones, swinging it deftly across his muscular thighs, then letting Chief stretch out in a race for life and liberty, while pellets of lead began whistling viciously past his ears.

"Catch who catch can!" he called defiantly over his shoulder as he headed for

the nearest practicable cover. "You're tackling the wrong man, I tell you, gentlemen, and I'll prove it to you in the end. Until then—ta-ta, my pretty fellows!"

The next moment Chief swung around a huge mass of rock, thus putting a bullet-proof shield at their backs.

For the next minute or two Carlos Houghton gave his every thought and energy to foiling the chase, swinging hither and thither as the cover best offered itself, yet all the time widening the space of ground between themselves and the leading chaser.

And it was not until he had for the time being lost the Vigilantes to sight that he gave his helpless burden more than a casual inspection.

He knew, though, that Rodney Church was alive, for he both felt and heard him; but now he had a better chance to improve the situation, losing precious little time in doing the best in his power.

A quick slash or two of a keen blade removed those bonds from arms and ankles, then he righted the young man, though still holding him in front, partly on pommel, partly on thighs.

"Steady, kid! Better this way for a bit, unless you feel equal to taking a whirl around and straddling behind me. I'd overweight Chief if I shifted places, so—"

"I don't— How can I thank you, sir?" huskily panted Church.

"By holding your hush until we're in better shape for indulging in chin-music," came the curt interruption. "Steady, now? Those fellows are just idiots enough to think they can kill if they can't catch!"

Another shot or two from the rear gave evidence that the Vigilantes were still sticking to the chase, but Chief ran on, low and level, "fairly eating up the ground," as his enthusiastic owner declared.

More than one pellet of lead came close enough for its shrill humming to be heard by both rescued and rescuer, but none broke skin on man or beast.

Carlos Houghton laughed his scorn, but Rodney shivered and shrank, showing how dreadfully his nerves had been shaken by the events of the past day and night.

More in pity for him than fear of the ultimate result, the Man of Muscle once more called all his cunning arts into play, dodging here and there, making as many crooks and curves as were necessary to keeping some sort of cover between themselves and those angry marksmen.

This lengthened the chase considerably, since at odd times the Vigilantes were able to gain a few rods by cutting across; but Chief kept gaining little by little, and long before his wondrous powers were wasted, all sight of the pursuers was lost.

Not until then did Houghton make any further change in the situation, but then he deftly swung Rodney around, holding him with sure grip until the youngster was fairly settled on that warm croup.

"Now I reckon you'll ride a weenty bit more easy, and—wouldn't mind eating a bite of grub, eh?"

"Don't stop for that, I beg of you, sir!" huskily muttered Church, with a shivering glance toward the rear.

"All right. I'm no more anxious than you to meet with those human hounds, just now, kid, but—you can chew a bit as we ride, can't you?"

From one of his capacious pockets Houghton produced a hunch of bread and cold meat, passing it back to his protege, and he gave a low, grim chuckle as he took note how eagerly Rodney grasped the food.

"He'll do, I reckon," was the big fellow's mental comment. "So long as his stomach don't go back on him there are hopes for even a dead man!"

Those few mouthfuls seemed to hearten the poor fellow up wonderfully, although he was still in bad case enough.

Saying nothing of the ugly bruises which almost masked him from head to foot, Rodney had suffered a thousand deaths in his mind since the brutal assault

made upon him by his drunken pard, Whooping Tom.

The poor fellow had been nearly insane from fright and excitement, and very little more would have killed him outright, or else left him a hopeless lunatic.

Something of this Carlos Houghton realized before that ride ended, and he began to feel more sympathy for the youngster.

Shifting his line of flight and making a turn sufficient to fairly convince himself the Vigilantes were thrown off the scent, for the time being at least, Houghton rode on some distance further, seemingly having a definite point in view.

Then he checked his good steed, saying, cheerfully:

"I reckon we'll take a bit of a breathing spell, pardner! Steady, and drop lightly like—that's the ticket!"

Having lowered the young miner safely to earth, Houghton himself alighted, leaving Chief to stand at ease or to nibble at the scanty herbage growing near if he saw fit.

Still faint and far from feeling himself, Rodney Church lay with back supported by a convenient boulder, looking the thanks his tongue was hardly able to shape more clearly.

"Don't mention it, pardner," briskly said the Man of Muscle, seating himself nigh at hand, seemingly without a thought of danger. "For one thing, I never did hanker after thanks, and for another—always wait until you're dead sure you've got something to give thanks for."

"Those devils! You saved me when—and back yonder when—"

"That's all right, I tell you, kid, and let it pass at that. If you must gush just so much wait until you've been cleared of all guilt in the eyes of your fellow men, please."

"I never—as God hears me, sir, I never harmed poor Tom!" huskily vowed the miner, tears in his eyes and in his voice as well.

"I believe all that, too, else I'd never have taken so mighty much trouble to cheat the rope," bluntly declared the sport. "No, boy, not even for the sake of your sister!"

"Iva! Oh, sir, tell me; she is—is not—"

"Your sister is safe and sound, in Peculiar, Rodney, with honest friends watching over her all the time. And for that same sister's sake, old man, you must get a brace on; just must, I tell you, boy!"

But the poor fellow was hardly able to brace up all at once, even after such glad assurance; and for some little time Houghton devoted all his efforts to that one important point.

He told how Iva had been taken care of after that audacious rescue of her brother from the rope of the Vigilantes, and then went on to explain how he had followed after the runaway miner, coming on the spot just in time to keep him from falling into the grip of Ironwood's men.

"Five minutes later would have told a far different tale, you want to understand, pardner. And yet—I was clearly in the right, for—didn't old John agree to give me a solid week in which to produce the slayer of Whooping Tom?"

"I never—before high Heaven, my hands are clear of that awful crime."

"Of course, but the next thing is how to prove your innocence before all Peculiar," gravely said the giant sport. "Until that can be done, kid, you're like a hunted hare; meat for all men who can take!"

"I pulled your fat out of the fire once, but we may never be so lucky again. Better keep safe while you can; and that's only through lying low until the real criminal can be brought to justice in the place you left vacant."

"If that only might be!"

"It must be—it shall be!" declared Houghton, a vision of a fair face and pair of trusting blue eyes springing up before his busy brain. "I promised your sister that I would—"

"Iva! Alone in Peculiar!" cried the young man, seeming only then fully to realize her situation.

He sprang to his feet with far more of energy than he had before exhibited, crying out in husky, but strong tones:

"Come, sir! Show or tell me the right way to town, for—I can't leave poor Iva there, to suffer—those devils will butcher her, just as they tried their level best to down me for good and all!"

A quick change came over the giant sport's face as he partly inclined his head like one listening; then he rose erect, hand on an arm and holding the excited miner in check.

"Careful, lad! Go to Peculiar? That would be to invite your own death, without at all helping your sister. For—careful, I say!"

"But—what do you mean, sir?" asked Church, in lowered tones.

"Hark! Listen and—do you hear those sounds, kid?"

The subdued clatter of hoof-strokes came floating on the air.

"They are John Ironwood's Vigilantes, boy, hunting for you and me!" the Man of Muscle said, gravely. "They are still hanging to our track, and catching now means sure death by the rope for both of us! For your sweet sister's sake, boy, not a sound out of your lips now!"

CHAPTER XVII.

RODNEY CHURCH PLEADS NOT GUILTY.

With those sounds growing more and more distinct with the passage of each moment, there was no room left for doubting the truth; the enemy was at no great distance, and evidently headed directly that way.

Rodney Church turned as pale as his discolored skin would admit, a violent shivering fit seizing him until the Man of Muscle mechanically put forth a hand to lend him support.

But then the young fellow rallied, giving evidence of good blood after all, since he muttered, quickly:

"Give me a gun, or a knife, even! I'll fight the devils until— Never alive, for the rope! Give me a gun, sir, or—"

"Steady, kid," coolly warned the sport, listening, while he spoke thus: "It only needs a bit of powder burning on our side to throw us on the wrong side of the fence altogether."

"But it's the rope if taken, and I'll never submit to that— I never will, though I have to fight the whole gang with my bare hands!"

"Oh, it hasn't come to fighting yet, boy, and I'm hoping it never will until we've got a better programme on our side. Now—come, Chief!"

The intelligent animal was on the full alert, evidently comprehending what yonder sounds portended and instantly obeyed his master.

Lightly crossing the shingle which strewn the base of that rocky height, Carlos lifted a mass of vines, laying bare a narrow opening in the seemingly intact wall, into which Chief quietly slipped, making no sounds which could have been heard by keen ears at a score of yards away.

"Come Rod, and we'll go into eclipse for a weenty bit," added the giant sport, his face wrinkling a bit under a silent laugh at that amazed look. "Don't break yur neck hurrying, of course, still, I do reckon we'd have less to answer for if we vanished before yonder gentry could—good enough."

Church passed through that opening, Houghton treading close upon his heels and letting that leafy curtain silently fall into place behind them.

The giant horseman paused for a bit, stooping and fumbling at the twisted vines as though fastening them in place, then rising up with a hand of warning placed upon the nearest arm of his protege.

For now those sounds were perilously near to hand, and the tones of human beings were added.

Then, as they peered through the minute openings amidst that mass of foliage, the fugitives could make out the forms of both men and horses, a bit later even recognizing faces as the party passed in front of their snug retreat.

"Ironwood's men, but old John isn't with them this bout," whispered Houghton, his warning grip growing a bit tighter, as though he hardly felt sure the nerve of his companion would prove equal to the test. "We wouldn't stand much show against the gang, would we, without fighting?"

"I'll fight— I'll never be taken alive again!"

Houghton slipped his other hand over those hot lips and nothing further was said while the Vigilantes were filing past their refuge.

This did not take long, for all went to show that the enemy had no definite idea as to the present whereabouts of their human prey, but had been led so near their covert more through pure chance than shrewd reasoning.

The armed force passed on without a halt, but enough of their talk was caught by the fugitives to show how little mercy either of them might expect if caught before time had cooled those evil passions.

Hanging was the mildest punishment spoken of, and there was a noose for the Man of Muscle as well as his protege.

When the sound of hoof-strokes fairly died out in the distance, Carlos released the young miner, chuckling grimly over the threats they had caught in passing.

"Well, lad, there's one weenty comfort; it's catching before stretching, and we're foot-free yet! With old John to curb his hotheads we'd stand at least half a show, but lacking him—go 'way, trouble!"

"If I was armed—"

"You'd make a bad matter no better in a holy hurry, of course!" almost gruffly interrupted the Man of Muscle, that dim light showing a frown upon his face. "Will you never learn wisdom, kid?"

"Should I offer my neck for the noose, then?"

"That's going to the opposite extreme, Rodney, and either is too foolish for any sort of use. Now—let me talk to you after the fashion of a friendly Dutch uncle; may I?"

"You have earned the right to say whatever you wish, sir," was the earnest response, as two far from steady hands came forward to meet that hearty grasp.

"That's better! Now—why do you reckon I've played target for all those fellows, yet never busted a cap my own self?"

"Simply because I knew that one shot would place me so far in the wrong that I'd never be able to get back without double trouble. As it is now, no man alive can lay a worse charge against me than that of giving 'em a good sweat in a horserace, or a dose of prickly pears!"

"Against this I can claim an armistice of one week, beginning last evening. I was to have that long for working out my side of the case, and showing up the fellow who really killed Whooping Tom."

"Oh, sir; if you only could do that!"

"Well, my word stands pledged that far, anyway, and I reckon it's a solid case of push! I've got to furnish material for a big neck-tie party at Peculiar, and lacking any better stuff— Well, we'll see!"

Carlos cut himself short, for he had no especial liking for boasting, even though it emanated from himself.

Rodney hardly comprehended his full meaning, however, and so that ticklish point was permitted to pass by.

By this time it was clearly apparent that the Vigilantes had no suspicions of their hiding place; but had passed on in the direction of the town, whether or no they had so soon abandoned the chase.

Satisfied on this point, Carlos struck a match, by aid of which Rodney could see something of their present quarters; a natural opening in that towering mass of rock, dry and well ventilated, sufficiently commodious for a larger party, and by no means a repulsive refuge when everything was taken into consideration.

"With grub to eat and water to drink, a fellow ought to be able to put in a day or two here, especially when he knew there was a noosed riata waiting for him on the outside," frankly observed the

giant sport after thus briefly doing the honors of his snug refuge.

Rodney muttered something about going to town for his sister, but was swiftly cut short, Houghton adding, in crisp tones:

"That's worse than folly, young fellow! You would merely be throwing your life away by venturing back to Peculiar before the whole truth is brought to light. And—first thing—I want your solemn pledge that you'll make no such attempt before I say you may. Will you give me that word, Rodney Church?"

"But—my sister?"

"Knows that I am working to clear your name and fame; knows that it would be equivalent to suicide were you to attempt to join her, either at Peculiar or elsewhere so long as this ugly charge hangs over your head."

"I am innocent; before high Heaven, Mr. Houghton, I swear that I never harmed poor Tom, much less done him to death!" brokenly affirmed the fugitive from the noose.

"I believe just that, Rodney, else I'd hardly be playing this hand," gravely assured the Man of Muscle. "But the main point is to make all the rest of the world believe the same way, don't you see?"

"What can I say, more than take my oath of innocence, sir?"

"Well, you can tell me all about it, so far as you know," coolly added Houghton, squatting down in a more comfortable attitude. "Maybe I can pick up a hint or two that will help cast more light on a dark subject; so—promulgate!"

His light, almost flippant manner was shrewdly conceived. It gave Rodney the impression that, after all, his situation could not be nearly so hopeless as it seemed from his present point of view.

This was precisely what the giant spotter was playing his cards for, and a faint smile twitched his long mustaches as he noted his success so far.

"If I could only meet my accusers on equal footing!"

"I wouldn't ask for that if I were you, kid," with a low chuckle. "For one thing, that equal footing would last barely long enough for a snug-fitting rope to lift you far above your accusers; and that wouldn't be overly healthy—for your mother's son!"

"But it's hard—mighty hard lines for an innocent man to skulk and hide like a dastardly assassin!"

"Better to hide than to hang, Rodney; and I'm beginning to fancy there may be something more in all this than simple murder."

"I don't— What do you mean, Mr. Houghton?"

"Well, maybe I'm letting my pet cat out of the sack a bit prematurely, kid, but since I've said this much, I'll add a weenty bit more," deliberately spoke the Man of Muscle.

"I'm beginning to believe that all this has been a carefully put-up job. That Tom Hooper was first made drunk, then egged on to beating you, after which he was killed by some of the scheming gang."

Church gave a low exclamation at these blunt words, shrinking like one from a stinging stroke. As yet he could not bear blunt allusion to the fate of his pard unmoved.

Rallying, he asked:

"Who would—who could have done it, do you think, sir?"

A pause followed this query, and evidently the giant spotter was in no great haste to more fully divulge his suspicions, supposing them to have taken shape far enough to point definitely at the criminal.

After a brief space the big fellow spoke again:

"Well, kid, time may show all that, but as for me, just at present I haven't a word further to say. Of course, I've got my suspicions as to the matter, but, after all, they are nothing more substantial than suspicions, entirely too vague and uncertain for open mention."

"I really believe that 't's all a foul scheme to get hold of the New Find, and the first step was to remove both you and

Hooper. If I am right in my belief, the whole truth must come out, sooner or later."

"And until it does, I am to skulk in hiding like a dog?"

"Well, there's a worse fate than even that, youngster," grimly hinted the sport. "Of course, there's no law out here in this wooden country against a crazy man's committing suicide, still, for your sister's sake, I do hope you'll wait a bit before chasing down that rope!"

The fugitive gave a low groan at this speech, but Houghton saw that his words were not entirely thrown away. Leaving that lesson to bear fruit, he spoke, in altered tones:

"Now, kid, I want you to clear up your wits as far as possible, then tell me just what happened after I left you on my way to Smackover."

"Don't try to cover anything over. Speak as straight as you know how, for a friend is listening, and without knowing everything he'll be handicapped from the send-off. Now—open your budget, kid."

"There isn't so much that I can tell you, sir, beyond what I've already said; that I was soundly sleeping when Tom got back to the shack, and the first I knew was his pounding and kicking me!" unsteadily began the young miner.

"Without a word of warning? There wasn't any hot words between you first? Just came in drunk and bounced you; is that the way of it, Rod?"

"Just that way, sir! Seemed like poor Tom was crazy drunk, for he gave me not even the ghost of a show!"

"And you? You fought him all you knew of course?"

"Yes, for I felt my very life was in danger! I did manage to draw my knife, and I tried my level best to cut him—in self-defense!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MAN OF MUSCLE'S SOUND ADVICE.

Dim though the light was where the two men sat, Rodney Church was keen-eyed enough to take note of the sudden change of expression with which Carlos Houghton received his last statement.

He saw that he had hurt his own cause, but quickly added:

"You adjured me to tell you the whole truth, Mr. Houghton, and I'm doing just that! I might have left out that, but—"

"I'm glad you didn't omit it, Church, although— Well, go on!"

"There isn't very much more that I can tell with a surety of its being solid truth sir," came the honest admission. "I was hardly myself, then, roused up as I had been, and with poor Tom fairly hammering the life out of me!"

"You say you tried to cut Hooper?"

"Yes, because I felt that he would murder me by inches unless I could manage to get out of his clutches."

"You knew him, sir. He was much bigger and heavier than I, and in his drunken fury I was little better than a baby in his clutches!"

"I know; go on, please."

"Well, I did get free, and then ran away, leaving the shanty. I was half-dead from his thumping, and I turned awfully sick as soon as I hit the cold air. And so— I got up to the rocks, then my legs gave way and I fell down, helpless."

A brief silence, during which Carlos seemed running over the various points thus briefly presented for his consideration. Then he slowly asked:

"How can you be so positive, then, that you didn't cut Hooper while defending your life, kid?"

"You doubt me still, sir?"

"No, for I believe you are telling what you firmly believe to be the truth. Yet, remember, kid, what you owned up to; that you were hardly yourself, and—mightn't you have cut Hooper without knowing it?"

"No, sir, and for a very good reason," came the earnest response. "I had hardly got clear and up among the rocks, when Tom struck a light, then came to the open door as though looking for me. And as he stood there, showing no signs of weakness save from the liquid damna-

tion he had swallowed, I saw—that very knife gripped in his right hand!"

Carlos Houghton was leaning forward, now, his eyes fairly glowing in the imperfect light, so intense had his interest become.

"You can take your oath to all that, kid?"

"Before God and man, yes! I saw just that, sir. And, as he stood in the doorway calling to me, I saw Hooper shake the knife my way, swearing he would crop my ears and slit my nose to teach me better manners."

Having made his defense in these earnest words, Rodney let his painfully tense muscles relax, looking pale and faint for a brief space.

"And you never saw or heard any one else, kid? You didn't think to look if the racket had drawn any person that way? Say from town?"

The young miner shook his head slowly before speaking.

"No, sir. As I said before, the cold night air turned me awfully sick, and I lay close, faced to the ground, lest Tom should hear me vomiting and come after me to finish his work!"

"That's a pity, lad! Dollars to doughnuts those whelps of Satan were even then in sight, and—"

"You mean Whiffler and Mixture, sir?"

"Or whoever turned the trick with your knife, yes! Of course, I'm not ready to accuse any one man of the killing, but—Well, time will tell the tale, I reckon!"

"If that telling only comes in time to save my neck!" bitterly muttered the wretched fugitive, once more covering face with hands, shivering violently.

Believing the reaction would be the more complete if time was given for full vent to those emotions, Carlos sat in silence for several minutes, only speaking again when Rodney raised his head from his hands.

"There's yet a little more to tell, I reckon, kid? Remember I have had only the partisan account given by your enemies, and that but imperfectly. For instance, how came they to catch you? And—if you had only gone at once for help, telling how Hooper had abused you?"

"Why should I do that, when—how was I treated that night at the Alhambra?" passionately cried Church, hands clinched and eyes glowing.

"It's a pity, all the same. Then no man could have accused you of the killing; or, if it was too late to save Hooper, you would have been cleared on the plea of self-defense."

"I never cut him, don't I tell you, man?"

"All right. Go on with the rest of it, then. You lay out among the rocks for the rest of the night, didn't you?"

"Yes. At first I thought I was dying! It seemed as though my poor skull was splintered all to bits! And—Then I must have fainted, or passed into a heavy stupor, like, for the next thing I knew was being roused up by loud yells, and seeing a gang of devils dancing in the red glow, I thought—or, rightly, I didn't stop to think!

"Looking back, now, I reckon I must have been dreaming of the row in the Alhambra, and fancied that all those devils were hunting my life. I know I jumped up and tried to escape by flight, but then—they took me, somehow, and—the rest was too much like a hideous nightmare for my telling, sir!"

"No need, luckily. I can guess at all that's lacking, now you've cleared up the main points. And now, kid, listen to me for a bit.

"Although the case may look pretty black against you, when one looks at it from the outside, still I have full faith that you never harmed Tom Hooper, even though 'twas your knife which cut short his thread of life."

"Before Heaven I am innocent, Mr. Houghton!"

"I firmly believe you are, Rodney, and so— I promise to clear away all these ugly clouds and never give over until you stand guiltless in the eyes of all

honest men, and are once more in full possession of your own."

Carlos spoke with strong earnestness, showing so much feeling that for a time Rodney Church forgot his own wrongs in wonderment that such a powerful interest should be taken in his welfare by a comparative stranger.

He intimated as much, and possibly a touch of suspicion entered his tones, for the giant spotter sport quickly spoke in turn:

"You are beginning to doubt me, I see, kid."

"Well, isn't it natural? A complete stranger, you offer to help me out of this ugly hobble if I'll agree to lie low in hiding."

"It's your only chance of cheating the rope, boy."

"So you say, but— How am I to know all that? What assurance have I that you are not scheming to get hold of the New Find?" demanded the young miner, suspicion growing by what it fed upon.

"That's silly, lad; but you'll know better when your brain has had a fair chance to grow steadier and your wits to clear," quietly answered the Man of Muscle. "For now— Listen a moment, please."

"I have fair reason to believe that your secret enemies are mine as well, so that in serving you, I am helping my own ends along. I'm here at Peculiar to run a vile criminal to earth, and if I can at the same time assist an honest lad to buck heavy odds, why not?"

"I beg your pardon, sir, but— A stranger?"

"We'll not always remain strangers, I hope, kid," and Houghton smiled as his memory turned back to that fair, sweet face and those glorious blue eyes owned by this man's sister. "But now; business, pard!"

"You are plenty safe so long as you stay in hiding here. You'll find plenty of grub and water provided, and yonder hangs a lamp you can use when night comes if you prefer light to darkness."

"And you, sir?"

"I'm going back to Peculiar, as my next step. For one thing, your sister ought not to remain in town, and so I'll send her back along the stage-line under safe escort. Uncle 'Lias Perkins for choice, to stop over some place where 'twill be safer for you to join company."

"Now, kid, I want you to promise me, on honor, that you will not stick so much as the tip of your nose outside this den until I've had plenty of time to go, do up my work, and then return here. Will you promise?"

"And if you should not return? If some accident should hinder?"

"I'll try my level to steer clear of all such, of course, still it may be as well to make due provision; so—if I am not back here in forty-eight hours from now, I'll never come!"

"And then?"

"Do the best you know how, but don't show your face in Peculiar unless you've sure proof of your innocence, kid!"

With this final warning, the Man of Muscle shook hands with his protegee; then silently stole forth from the cavern, first making sure the coast was clear before permitting Chief to follow after.

Seeing no signs of the Vigilantes in that vicinity, however, Houghton mounted his good steed and set forth on his return journey to Peculiar, showing no outward trace of uneasiness as to the outcome, although a less bold man might well have flinched from the prospect.

True, he had not burned a grain of powder in return for all the shots fired his way, but he had treated at least two members of John Ironwood's band most unceremoniously, to say nothing of for the second time carrying off the man they had marked as fit food for the rope.

"I reckon it'll be a he-old kick, unless I can buzz old John first," formed a small portion of his busy reflections while riding rapidly toward Peculiar. "Well, they can't do no worse than make a necktie party out of it all, and— It's worth all that to serve that sweet little angel."

The giant sport saw nothing of the Vigilantes while on his way to the bustling little mining town, and from them his thoughts had passed on to a far more agreeable subject; to the owner of those honest blue eyes, and again he heard Iva Church assure him that—

"Steady, boy!"

Chief was just bearing his musing master around the point of rock which has already been mentioned in close connection with the death tree of Peculiar, when Houghton saw an armed force drawn up ahead, with at least a half score of rifles leveled in his direction.

CHAPTER XIX.

MAN OF MUSCLE'S MATCHLESS NERVE.

John Ironwood was at the head of the party, which consisted wholly of Vigilantes, but he sat his horse in grim silence, touching neither revolver nor repeating rifle.

Barely fifty yards away, and at that short range hardly a bullet could be expected to miss its target.

Beyond a doubt the Vigilance Committee had sighted the giant rider while yet at a distance, and had quietly waited under cover for him to come within easy range of their weapons. And now—

"Hands up, Carlos Houghton!"

The Man of Muscle had mechanically halted his horse at first sight of that living barrier, but he could hardly be said to have acted through fear, and most assuredly betrayed no such emotion now.

He failed to exactly locate that first command, but he knew easily enough that it never came through the lips of John Ironwood, and upon that leader his gaze was now fixed.

As though he felt its influence, the gaunt chief spoke out in harsh tones an instant later.

"Reckon you'd better give 'em a hyste, pardner. The boys don't—"

Instead of obeying, Houghton rested his hands lightly upon his hips, mustached lips curling in scorn as he dauntlessly faced the enemy.

No man living knew better than he how surely he was doomed if yonder leveled rifles should explode in a volley, yet he never flinched, never lost a shade of color, and actually seemed laughing death to scorn.

"I'll talk to you, John Ironwood, because you are at least half-way white," he said, coolly.

"Make him lift his dukes, cap'n. First ye know he'll yank a gun and play little old thunder!"

"I'll hold up my hands when a single man is smart enough to catch the drop on me, but never to a whole gang like this," answered the spotter sport, without waiting for the gaunt old chief to issue the order.

"If you don't savor such talk, gentlemen, pick trigger and go boast of riddling a lone man. But make sure work of your first shots, or I'll start another boneyard for Peculiar right after."

"Don't shoot, lads," ordered Ironwood. "An' you, Houghton—"

"What's gone wrong with you fellows, anyway?" demanded the sport, unceremoniously. "Are you crazy, or merely drunk before your regular time?"

"Well, now, he totes his cheek with him, don't he?"

"Cheek won't save your neck, Mr. Houghton, unless— Whar's Rodney Church?"

John Ironwood spoke in uncompromising tones, his horse moving a little closer to the sport at the same time.

"I can tell you where he isn't," came the swift retort. "He isn't stretching hemp for the crimes of another man!"

"Who set you up as judge, Carlos Houghton?"

"My commission bears the same signature as your own, John Ironwood; that of self. And now, leave idle quips and cranks on the side while we talk solid business. Tell your boys to put down their guns, will you, sir?"

"Better tell us to put him down, captain!"

"Let him give the order, and you fellows

carry it into execution, and I'm going bail there'll be heap sight more fugitives from hanging in this section than Rodney Church," warned the man of nerve.

"Steady, the whole o' ye!" commanded the Vigilante chief. "Lower ye'r guns, boys. He can't well skip, even ef he takes a notion to try it on."

"Oh, I'm not thinking of turning tail, gentlemen. I'm too hugely delighted with my present company. Haven't seen so many cranks all in a heap since last inspecting the insane asylum or—the Pen!"

This came with such exquisite coolness and nerve that more than one of the Vigilantes was surprised into a laugh, while even grim old John Ironwood cracked a brief smile.

Instead of joining in either laugh or smile, the giant centaur gave a portentous frown, his voice ringing forth cold and stern an instant later.

"This isn't a monkey show, nor yet an exhibition of horse play, gentlemen. I mean solid business, even if you don't, so—Ironwood!"

"You're talkin', Mr. Houghton."

"See that you listen, then, John. First, what means this sort of fool treatment, anyway? What have I done to be met with guns, so-fashion?"

"Didn't you run off Rod Church, over yender in the hills?"

"Of course I did, and I had a perfect right to do just that, and a blamed sight worse if I saw fit," came the bold asseveration. "Didn't I give you my pledge to furnish fit and proper food for a neck-tie party here at Peculiar?"

"Yes, but—"

"And didn't you agree to give me one week's law in which to make my promise good?"

"Wal, I reckon that's dif'rent from this, Mr. Houghton."

"It is just this much difference, John Ironwood, and I defy you to make anything better out of it. I have kept my part of the bargain, so far, while you fellows have broken yours all to thunder!"

Ugly mutterings came from some of the armed men at this bold accusation, but instead of flinching or betraying aught of uneasiness in the face of such heavy odds, the Man of Muscle seemed to dilate and grow even larger in his stern indignation.

"You ambush me here, just as though I was the vilest criminal unhung! Yet what have I done? What sort of charges can you bring against me? In what respect have I sinned, John Ironwood?"

"You run off the kid when he was ketched by a couple of my men, didn't ye, Mr. Houghton?"

"I did, and I glory in it, too! Not because there were two to one, but because there were enough others within eye-range to make it more interesting! And—Right here you have the nubbin, gentlemen!"

"I found Rodney Church, trussed up, arms and legs, like a shoat for roasting. I set him free, but how did I do it? With fire and steel?"

"Never a bit of it, John! I just picked your two rascals up by the nape o' the neck and gave them the grand dump inside a prickly pear patch! And, John, you'd just ought to've seen them kick and heard 'em go squeal like so many pigs caught under a gate!"

Again that involuntary laugh, that dawning smile; and, just as before, Carlos Houghton continued in gravely reproving accents:

"I can see nothing to laugh at on either side, gentlemen. Even before I laid hands on those fellows, one of them tried his foolish best to blow me through, and as I rode away with the kid, bullets swarmed worse than a mashed hornet's nest! And— Did I even bu'st a primer in return?"

"No, sir! There isn't a liar in your whole outfit bold enough to say that I burned even one weenty grain of powder in return for all they sent after me!"

"But—you did run off with the kid!" persisted Ironwood.

"Of course I did, and I'll repeat the action just as often as you fellows try to run him in," came the swift retort. "But

if you are even one-half as white as you look and claim to be, gentlemen, you'll not give me another such chance."

"I have staked my own neck that you shall have full payment for the murder of Tom Hooper. I have sworn to run down the real criminal and fetch him back here for the rope, or else to turn Rodney Church over to you for a fair trial and proper punishment."

"That's what we was takin' him for, blame ye."

"In spite of the fact that I had a regular agreement with your chief and commander, Honest John Ironwood, in which he gave me one week to turn up the truth, or, lacking a better, to offer my neck for the rope as a fitting substitute."

"Now, full and free warning, all!"

"I seek no quarrel with any man, or any set of men. I mean to go on about my business, never interfering with the affairs of others unless that other should prove to be the assassin I've agreed to run down for justice to make an example of."

"So, a last word, and one with the bark all on it, too!"

"After this, if I'm shot at, I'll shoot back the quickest, the surest, the straightest I know how."

"You may kill me, but you can't even begin to scare or to cow me, gentlemen, though you jump in twenty or forty or a hundred to my lonesome!"

Swift and direct came this grand defiance, backed up as it was by that magnificent presence, every line of which showed the man.

A brief silence, then Houghton spoke again:

"Now, Mr. Ironwood, and the rest of you gentlemen, I'm going on to town to look after a bit of important private business. I never did like to take a circle when I saw a straight line, and so, if you see fit to bar my passage, all right. Only, there'll be red-hot trouble if you do!"

And the giant sport drew a revolver with each hand, raising the hammers with a single motion, easily carrying the weapons with silver-sighted muzzles turned back to lightly touch his shoulders.

He was purposely deliberate in his actions, giving the Vigilantes sufficient time to weigh his words and make up their mind as to their best course of action.

Then he gave Chief the signal, and the horse stepped forward, heading direct for the center of that armed line of horsemen!

It was an exhibition of marvelous nerve, but Carlos Houghton gave not the slightest sign of doubt or of irresolution.

He knew that a collision must surely end in his death, even though he might succeed in exacting a high price for that life.

Few men would have thought of making such a daring bluff. Fewer still could have carried it through without making a botch of it all.

More than two-thirds of that space was crossed by Chief and his master without the slightest move on the part of that armed line; but then, just as a deadly collision seemed inevitable, John Ironwood lifted a hand and set the example for his men by moving aside a trifle.

This opened a narrow passage, through which the Man of Muscle rode at a measured pace, grim and stern, making no sign, speaking no word.

The crisis was past, now, but Houghton still rode on at a foot-pace, never once looking over shoulder, the sole change being when he lowered his guns and slipped each back into its scabbard.

A minute or two longer sufficed to carry the giant sport fairly into Peculiar, where he wasted very little time in disposing of his good steed for the time being.

When safely stabled and cared for as such a noble creature richly deserved, Houghton left Chief and once more headed for the hotel under whose friendly roof Iva Church had found a temporary home.

Just as though he was watching for such an arrival, Uncle Lias Perkins hurried out of the hotel to eagerly greet the Man of Muscle, asking a score of questions, one following another as rapidly as

his nimble tongue could shape the syllables.

Instead of making categorical reply to all this, Houghton gripped that horny paw firmly, speaking in lowered, but very earnest tones:

"Are you willing to do Miss Church a good turn, pardner?"

"Try me, boss! She 'minds me so turrible strong of my own gal—dead, long ago. But jest show me how I kin, boss, an' see how quick I'll jump to ketch the chaine."

"You can do just that, Uncle Lias, by helping her jump the town. Peculiar's no fit place for Rodney Church's sister, and she stays here at the risk of her life—or even worse!"

CHAPTER XX.

A GLIMPSE OF A DANGEROUS GAME.

That same evening a choice little coterie was holding session in Peculiar, discussing matters which closely concerned others beside Carlos Houghton, although his name found mention the oftenest, perhaps.

That confidential group consisted of a round half-dozen, gathered in the private rooms belonging to Hugh Kellar, gambler, man-about-town, and sport in general.

Besides the owner of the apartment and its supplies, there may be named his especial crony, Eli Jacks, likewise one who made a living by keeping on the right side of the table of green cloth.

In addition, there was Dick Whiffler and Jerry Mixture, the two men who first raised the alarm of the burning shack on the hillside, which ended in the discovery of the murdered pard of the New Find.

Two other fellows who filled minor positions as related to Hugh Kellar, completed the coterie for this especial occasion.

Dick Whiffler had been doing no small degree of the talking up to date, winding up with a flood of savage curses against the Man of Muscle.

"I wish Satan luck of his bargain when Houghton goes home, but unless he gets a regiment of his imps to help, it'll be a tough tussle to see who takes the first brimstone bath!"

"A hard man to shadow, eh, Richard?"

"That's all right, Kellar. We're not the only fellows he's made monkeys of, I reckon!"

"Let him slip for the present, gentlemen," said the head gambler, with a change of both tone and manner. "I asked you here to talk over a matter of business in which we all ought to hold a deep interest."

"Meaning the New Find of course?" cut in Eli Jacks.

"Yes. There's a big fortune in that mine if we work it properly."

"Provided we get fair hold of it, don't you mean, Kellar?"

"We've about as good as got that, right now, Eli! Satan surely was serving us when we were off guard, as witness the way Rodney Church killed his pard."

"That trip over the road let you out anyway, Hugh. Lucky, too, if any big row should be kicked up over our claiming the mine."

"That's what I meant, pardner," with a low chuckle. "It was a close call for me, with Captain Clutch and his Crooks all reaching out for my life, but—well, I'm not so sure I wouldn't run the same long chances over rather than be in Peculiar when such a deed was done."

"Well, it's plain enough who did the trick, and if the crazy fool had only stuck it out—had only sworn he killed to save his own life!"

"That would be better for him, but not nearly so smooth sailing for us," crisply cut in the gambler, with an impatient gesture. "The only fault I can find with it all is his cheating the rope so long."

"Satan roast that big scoundrel, anyway!"

"Amen!"

"Shall we wait for Satan to take another hand in, though? But that needn't come under discussion just yet, either."

"What is it you wanted us for, anyway, Kellar?"

"Your candid opinion on a little transaction which— What is that, please, gentlemen?"

With the words Hugh Kellar slipped a document from out his bosom and deftly spread it open before those eagerly curious eyes.

A brief look, then Eli Jacks exclaimed:

"A bill of sale, covering the New Find mining property! And signed by Thomas Hooper!"

"For value received, take notice, gentlemen," coolly added Kellar, leaning back in his chair, one thumb slipped in arm-hole, its mate aiding in twirling the ends of that neatly-kept mustache.

"Looks like the pure quill, too!"

"Which it most assuredly is, friend Eli," came the easy assurance. "You surely don't for a moment imagine that I would have ought to do with anything crooked, Mr. Jacks?"

The other gambler showed little concern over this gentle reproof, but gave the paper a still closer examination, like one feeling far from satisfied that all was on the dead level.

The other members of that seance showed scarcely less interest, although they said but little, and that in minor tones.

"You're simply wasting your time, Eli, for you couldn't find nor yet pick a flaw in that document, though you tried for a solid week!"

"But—is it square goods, Hugh?"

"Square as a die, straight as a string, gentlemen," came the prompt assurance. "Would I tell you that unless I really meant it?"

"Well, better men than you have been caught in a lie before now," bluntly declared Eli Jacks, still with eyes on that paper, so valuable if genuine.

"You can't catch me in one now, though. That is the pure quill, and worth one hundred cents on the dollar of any man's good money."

"It does look that way, for a scandalous fact, pardner, but—how did you get it? And when?"

"That shows plainly enough on the face of it, I reckon," with a faint show of impatience. "I took it on a debt of honor, just as Whooping Tom gave it. He owed more than he could square off, otherwise, so—right here you see the result, gentlemen!"

"If it only had another signature at the bottom!"

"Meaning that of Rodney Church, Eli?"

"Of course. He owned an equal share in the mine, as everybody knows who knows anything about the matter at all. And so—he'll make a he-old kick if you try to hold the New Find on Whooping Tom's signature alone, Kellar!"

"He'll do his kicking on empty air, if at all," was the cool retort. "So long as he stays away from Peculiar, Church is helpless. If he ever ventures back here, he'll be worse than that—he'll swing for the murder of his pard, and then who'll dare say us nay when I flash up this bit of paper?"

"What if he puts his case into legal hands, and yet lies low himself?" suggested Eli Jacks, who seemed bent on picking flaws in that grand prospect.

"Possession is nine points of the law, and I'll take mighty good care that no one jumps the mine before I put in my claim."

"And the girl?"

"Rodney Church's sister, is it?"

"Of course. She is his sister, I take it."

"I believe she claims to be—yes."

"Then wouldn't she come in for her brother's share? And without his signature that of Whooping Tom's isn't worth the paper it's written on! You're smart enough to know all that, Kellar, surely?"

"I'm too smart to believe all that, rather," was the cool retort.

"What do you mean? Surely they were pards in the New Find?"

"Outwardly, perhaps—but where's the documents to prove that partnership? I had it from Hooper's own lips that they never had a line of writing drawn up, nor were any papers placed on record. So—how can Rodney Church himself, let alone a real or pretended sister, make good a claim against a regular bill of sale such as I now hold?"

This was a revelation to both Eli Jacks

and his comrades, and for a few minutes an eager and confused buzz filled the room as all seemed talking at once.

Then, when comparative quiet was restored, Jacks picked up a hint let fall by the master-schemer, saying:

"Pretended sister? Surely you don't take her for an impostor?"

"Well, that depends on the turn things take," came the deliberate response. "I may see fit to prove her an adventuress, playing for a big stake, or— Well, gentlemen. I'm a single man at present, and the young lady is a pretty good-looker!"

"What? You surely don't mean to jump over the broomstick, Kellar?"

"I might, to save worse trouble."

"There's others who've found out she's a good-looker, I take it," cut in Dick Whiffler. "And with backers like that infernal Houghton, to say nothing of Uncle 'Lias, she'll make a mighty tough nut to crack!"

Hugh Kellar made a swift gesture, his more than comely face marred by a dark and forbidding scowl.

"Right there you see the one dangerous snag in the channel, gentlemen, as I'm free to confess. He's a bad man to buck against, but where we have so much at stake we surely ought to surmount that obstacle?"

"It's easy done in talk, boss, but mighty sight different when you come to turn the trick," grimly observed Jerry Mixture. "I know, because I've been there. Eh, Dick?"

"You bet pour sweet life! He's nasty medicine, and I'm not in any great rush to pick up such a job as you're hinting at, Kellar."

"After all, lads, he's only one man, and—"

"But he's a devil of a man, all the same! If you don't think that way, boss, suppose you give him a try once!"

"Perhaps I may take a little flyer, just for luck; but, gentlemen, if I take all the risk as well as do all the finer scheming, of course I'd be a fool to share the proceeds with those who merely looked on from a safe distance."

This was a hint far from sweet to the taste, and the other plotters interchanged looks which told as much.

Hugh Kellar evidently felt that this was the proper moment in which to clap on the finishing touch, for he leaned confidentially forward in his chair, speaking smoothly, persuasively:

"As I admitted, gentlemen, right there lies the worst obstacle yet remaining in our course. Without it, all the rest would be smooth sailing. Now—one word further, please!"

"Remove that obstacle, between you, and then I'll form a company to run the New Find, with your names all on the list as partners!"

This was a dazzling offer, on its face, yet the other men showed no especial haste about jumping at the glittering bait.

"It's risky, powerful risky, boss!"

"Yes; but the pay is in proportion. Now, will you accept, lads?"

Whiffler and Mixture interchanged looks, then rose from their seats and drew apart to consult in low, guarded whispers.

CHAPTER XXI.

A JOB FOR UNCLE 'LIAS.

The honest old prospector showed a desire to learn more definitely just what peril menaced the young woman in whom he had come to feel so strong an interest, but that was hardly the place for confidential communications, as Carlos Houghton quickly made him comprehend.

"Wait a bit, Uncle 'Lias," he said, flashing a keen glance around to see whether or no that meeting had drawn dangerous curiosity their way, "After I've seen Miss Church I'll have more to say for your private ear, I reckon."

"An' the boy, sir?"

"Safe and sound for now, Perkins. Let that cork up your curiosity, please, for—Miss Church?"

"Pritty as a pink, sweeter'n a posy, jest honin' fer to see you come back home, sir! An' ef ever thar' was a she-angel—"

"Careful, Uncle 'Lias!" playfully interrupted the Man of Muscle, as he passed on

to the hotel. "I'll grow jealous if you say too much!"

"You don't need—no, sir, I don't reckon you hardly need to be! Ef you only know'd how—but I hain't tellin' no tales out o' schooltime—no, sir!"

Carlos laughed lightly as he passed on, yet there was a deeper color on his cheeks, a brighter sparkle in his gray eyes as he entered the hotel and hurried directly up to his room.

Of course Uncle 'Lias meant nothing especial. His tongue was notorious for its supple hinges. He was always talking, and at least half of the time merely chattering to hear his own eloquence.

And yet—

Always neat and tidy whenever his surroundings would permit, Carlos seemed more than ever desirous of making himself presentable on this particular occasion, ransacking his grip for fresh garments, spending a goodly number of minutes in front of the little mirror hanging against the wall near the foot of his narrow bed.

Still, clean-shaven and neatly combed, brushed and clean-garbed though he was, with the faintest possible hint of perfume hanging about his trained mustaches, it was no less the man who sought an interview with Iva Church below stairs, in the parlor, where she was so impatiently waiting his coming to report according to promise.

Now, as on the original occasion, Uncle 'Lias was on hand to "do the proper" as it should be, although the Man of Muscle could possibly have worried along without such backing.

Iva extended both hands in eager greeting, but Houghton was still cool and level-headed enough to read that interest aright—just then the maiden's thoughts were wholly given to her endangered brother.

"I have seen him, and left Rodney safe and sound, Miss Church," comprehensively reported the giant spotter, saying much in little.

"Oh, thank Heaven for that!"

"An' crowdin' Heaven turrrible close, ma'am, reckon you mought put the boss, hyar," bluntly suggested Uncle 'Lias.

"I do! And if I fail to express my thanks—"

"Please don't, Miss Church! I'm already overthanked for what little I've been able to do, and adding more to the debt will fairly swamp me!" declared Houghton, yet his face told lies if he wasn't hugely enjoying the gratitude as expressed by those big blue eyes.

His own eyes exerted a magnetic influence, too, and Iva blushed most divinely as she freed her hands and retreated a little to a seat on the lumpy sofa ranged along one wall.

Carlos looked as though he might have tried to prolong that hand-holding had there been less of a crowd within those four walls, but at that moment Uncle 'Lias seemed to loom up like a platoon, covered with more eyes than tail of peacock can boast, and so—the sport took possession of a chair instead, looking and speaking just like any ordinary agent making a report to his employer.

He made his tale far less thrilling than he might have done without crowding the limits of truth, but that was wisest, for he could see how powerfully the maiden was agitated even yet.

He made Iva realize that Rodney was in a safe refuge, with very little risk of further trouble from his enemies so long as ordinary prudence was observed.

"At the same time, Miss Church, it would be worse than folly for him to even think of venturing here, even for the purpose of meeting you. It was with no little difficulty that I made Rodney realize just that, but I trust you will be willing to follow my advice so far?"

"I will, sir, for my poor, dear brother's sake," assented the maiden, in far from steady tones, her eyes moist with emotion. "Whatever you advise as my brother's friend—"

"And yours, Miss Church?"

That blush deepened, those eyes drooped, but Iva bowed assent as she murmured softly:

"As Rodney's friend and mine, Houghton!"

"Thanks. I'll never betray the confidence you repose in me, Miss Church, and if I fail to prove my friendship to both, 'twill be because the opportunity is lacking, not the will."

"You bet your sweet existence, now!" enthusiastically endorsed Uncle 'Lias, just in time to play the role of cold water. "An' one sech friend as him is wu'th a hull rijiment o' common truck—now you hear me blow my bazoo, ma'am!"

Carlos frowned at that point, but it could hardly have been at Miss Church, do you think?

Be that as it may, Houghton once more picked up the thread of business, speaking in cool, matter-of-fact tones which contrasted strongly with his glowing eyes.

"I'm glad you promise so readily, Miss Church, for there is none too much time to be wasted in argument. Now—listen, please!"

"As I made Rodney see, it is altogether out of the question his coming here under existing circumstances. So, as he can't come, you must go, if you are to meet at all soon."

"Tell me where to go, and how, Mr. Houghton. All I wish is to know just how I can best serve my poor brother."

"Well, I have studied it all out, and I believe I've hit upon the safest as well as the wisest course to pursue."

"You will leave Peculiar by stage, under the escort of Uncle 'Lias, here—"

"An' mighty proud Uncle 'Lias is fer to hev' the honor chucked onto himself, too!" declared that worthy member of the conference.

"You ought to be," quickly added the Man of Muscle. "I only wish that honor might fall to my share, but I fancy I can be of better service right here at this end of the line."

"Then you think there is danger, sir?"

"Not a bit of it, my dear friend!" hastily disclaimed the giant sport, at the same time flashing a covert glance of warning toward Uncle 'Lias. "At the same time I reckon 'twould be just as well to keep all other eyes blinded to the facts, and so—that's what I meant."

"I'll stay here in town, to keep attention diverted until after you are safely off with Uncle 'Lias."

"And Rodney?"

"Will meet you in due time, of course. That will be my share of the work, guiding him to where you are in waiting. Now—listen, please."

"You will take the stage this very evening, booked for Smackover. Uncle 'Lias will go along, ostensibly on business of his own, and his destination will be the same as yours."

"Leaving the stage at Smackover, you will pass the night, or the rest of it, rather, at the hotel, then take the cross-line leading to Giddy Gap, where you will again halt, there to wait for the arrival of your brother."

"Slick as soap-grease, an' mighty sight smoother, too!" asserted the graybeard, vigorously nodding his frosty pow in approval.

"I will follow your instructions to the very letter, Mr. Houghton," said Iva, yet with a touch of fresh anxiety in her tones as she asked: "And brother? You are quite certain 'twill be safe for him to venture there, sir? Oh, if I could but see him, now!"

"I believe he will be running no more than ordinary risk, Miss Church, else I'd never make the suggestion," reassured the Man of Muscle. "I pledge my word that you shall see him shortly, but for now—May I speak plainly, good friend?"

"If you only would, Mr. Houghton!"

"If I am holding anything back, Miss Church, believe me 'tis wholly and solely for your own good," came the earnest assurance. "Now I am not trying to scare you, nor to at all magnify the difficulty of the task I have undertaken; but it's the solemn truth that we've got to keep clear brains and steady wits in order to foil our enemies and pull through the rapids without an upset."

"That's what's the matter," confirmed Uncle 'Lias.

"Your eyes—I can read them like a printed page, Miss Church!"

How divinely Iva did blush, just then! Yet—why should she?

"Your eyes have been asking the question your lips refrained from putting into words," continued the sport, his own gray orbs speaking in readily interpreted language.

"If I haven't answered their questions, my friend, believe me 'twas through a knowledge that so answering might add to rather than detract from the perils which menace both yourself and your brother."

"Rodney is safe, unharmed, out of the reach of his worst enemies; but just where he is in waiting, or how far it may be from here, I'd rather not state, for this reason:

"What you are ignorant of you can't tell, either by accident or through being questioned. Can you understand what I mean, Miss Church?"

"You think there is danger of my being intercepted by Rodney's enemies, and questioned as to his whereabouts?"

"Well, I'm not going quite that far," with a passing smile, yet nodding approval of her quick grasp of the situation. "Still, there is a remote possibility of something of the sort taking place; and so, to keep on the safest side, I'd rather not tell you just where your brother is at present."

"I understand, now, and I repeat my thanks, Mr. Houghton."

"Not now, Miss Church. When all trouble is passed, and we are ready to laugh at the fears and schemings and contrivances of this time, then you may thank me all in a bunch, if you see fit. Until then, I can wait!"

His eyes said far more than his tongue, for Uncle 'Lias could not so readily follow that sort of speech.

"Now, friends, we can consider the matter settled. You will take the stage this evening for Smackover, going from there to Giddy Gap."

"I will say good-by now, Miss Church, for I'll not be at the stage when you take your departure."

"Are you going away again, then, sir?"

"No; but I reckon I'd do more harm than good were I to see you both safely off. If the fellows who are scheming to get hold of the New Find were to see me there they'd naturally jump to the conclusion that you were going to join your brother. And that—"

"Poor Rodney! To be forced to hide and skulk like a criminal!"

"Only for a time, and his innocence will shine forth all the brighter for this brief eclipse," swiftly assured the giant sport, his hands clasping hers, his eyes holding hers as by a spell.

"Now—good-by for a time, Miss Church. Good luck attend you from start to finish. And—trust Uncle 'Lias in every respect, for he's a heart of gold, every grain of it!"

"I will trust him, sir. And you? We will meet again?"

"Yes. As soon as it is safe to make the trip we'll rejoin you at the Tip-top House, in Giddy Gap. This note will be your warranty, and the landlord will see that you are given every comfort and care his place can afford."

CHAPTER XXII.

TO COVER HER FLIGHT.

Like a blessed cherubim Uncle 'Lias sat beaming upon the younger people, blissfully unconscious of what an incubus he was, just then and right there.

"A heart of gold" Carlos Houghton had termed the graybeard, but it is open to doubt whether the golden heart was valued as it ought to be by one of that couple just then.

And yet, perhaps, 'twas better thus.

Carlos had won his way with marvelous rapidity, thanks to his good fortune in having so many chances to deepen that favorable first impression; but if he had been free to "crowd the race" just then, he might have ruined all his blossoming hopes by frightening the one he wished to win.

Iva took the prepared note and placed it in safe keeping.

The Man of Muscle added a few words to make all points sure.

"You will get ready for the evening

stage, Miss Church, as I said before. Don't let any one know of your intention, save the landlord. He can be trusted to hold his hush.

"And you, Uncle 'Lias; you'll be on deck?"

"You bet your sweet life I just will, sir!"

"Good enough! You've got a precious treasure to guard, Perkins, and I look to you for a favorable report when next we meet. Now—good-by, until we all may meet again, Miss Church!"

"Good-by, my dear friend! If we are to meet again—all of us—I shall know whom to thank for that glad reunion," said the maiden, both hands nestling in his, her eyes swimming with tears the while.

Carlos bent low enough to kiss those hands (confound that complacent idiot!), and then, without venturing further, turned and left the room, making a covert sign which Uncle 'Lias was keen enough to rightly interpret.

The veteran quickly followed after the sport, and was given a brief addition to the instructions already received.

"You don't want to miss this first stage, Perkins, so make sure you are both in readiness to get aboard. Delay might ruin everything."

"What is it, boss? You're keepin' back somethin' which you didn't keer to let the sweetheart know."

"Of course. I can tell you, though, Uncle 'Lias."

"Wal, now, I want to snicker to snort!"

"I believe I've caught a clew to the whole dirty business, Perkins, and it amounts to just this much: If the rascals who are playing for the New Find should learn, or even suspect, that Miss Church is going off to join her brother, there'd be nasty trouble to a dead moral!"

"They won't l'arn it from me, sir."

"That's what I wished to caution you about. I'm going to do all I know how to cover her flight from Peculiar, and if you act prudently I believe you can get fairly started before any of the gang can even suspect your purpose."

"Once fairly out of town I hardly see how they can give you trouble in any way, shape or form."

"Unless Cap'n Clutch chips in again, an' that hain't no ways likely."

"Hardly. Now, Uncle 'Lias, do the best you know how, for it's a precious charge I'm giving you! If you only knew—"

"Mebbe I kin guess, Houghton! An' then—wal, maybe you'll reckon I'm a terrible liar, but Lizzie tuck a'ter her mother—she's the very moral of my dead girl; an' so—ef harm comes to her, Uncle 'Lias won't be livin' fer to tell of it!"

With a firm hand-grip the two men parted, each going his way to do what lay in their power to insure the welfare of brother and sister.

As the Man of Muscle shrewdly calculated, the story of his bluffing the whole Vigilance Committee had already found circulation, and he was the center of attraction as he leisurely paraded through Peculiar, for once in his life playing the "mighty chief."

But he felt that this ostentation was fairly excusable under the circumstances, and cared very little as to what outsiders might think of either actions or of actor.

Hoping through this morbid curiosity to rivet attention on himself and thus cover the flight of Rodney's sister, the giant sport kept in the portions of Peculiar most remote from the hotel and stage office until after the coming and departure of the coach.

While thus acting his part, Houghton found that nearly every member of the clique which he suspected of scheming for the New Find, thanks to their past connection with whisky-loving Tom Hooper, was in town.

He saw Eli Jacks, Dick Whiffler, Jerry Mixture, in company with a number of other hangers-on at the Alhambra and gaming houses patronized by "the gang," but Hugh Kellar was not in evidence.

Oddly enough, perhaps, this single exception gave the Man of Muscle greater uneasiness than he would have felt had all the rest been out of sight, yet—how could

the Peculiar sport have learned ought to make mischief?

When the hour for the stage to take its departure passed by, Houghton strolled back to the hotel, and through careless questioning learned that both Miss Church and Uncle 'Lias had taken passage for Smackover or beyond, while naught had been seen of Hugh Kellar.

"Off on one of his trips, I reckon," mused the sport, as he went to his chamber and prepared for supper. "If the other day hadn't shown to the contrary, I'd more than half believe him Captain Clutch!"

But that still raw scar across his scalp which made him wince at the comb touched it, told Houghton how ridiculous would be such a suspicion, no matter how capable the Peculiar sport might be of filling just such a criminal office.

"The Crooks were after him, easy enough, and—pity they let him slip through their fingers so easily! And yet—You're lying, old man!"

"You know you'd kick like a bay steer if any other should rake Hugh Kellar from taw before you're ready to draw your net!"

The Man of Muscle ate a hearty meal, as usual with him, then went forth on another little ramble through the town, still deeming it wisest to show the enemy he had no present intention of giving them the shake.

He saw quite sufficient to feel convinced that his movements were being watched after a covert fashion, doubtless by some of the Vigilance Committee, although that was not positive as yet.

"Wish to keep tab in case I try to make a sneak and visit Rodney Church, eh?" grimly mused the sport, as he discovered his shadows. "All right! Just hang around my heels, please, for then you'll be making no fresh trouble for my friends, thank you."

Playing the role of sport to perfection, Carlos "went the rounds," seemingly enjoying his growing notoriety, spending money freely in drinks for the crowd, although he barely touched lips to the glass; less than that would too plainly lift the mask he desired to wear.

After taking quite a stroll, doing all he knew how to put himself in evidence, Houghton dropped in at the Alhambra, where he found quite a crowd gathered, some drinking at the bar, but by far the greater portion further on at the faro tables.

Billy Cope was a generous soul, after the "sporting" view, and his place was by long odds the most popular "shebang" of that description within Peculiar limits.

Here the Man of Muscle found the gang strongly in evidence, although he failed to see aught of the leader, Hugh Kellar.

In hopes of learning something by which that absence might be accounted for rather than through love of gambling or a hope of gain, the giant spotter made his way leisurely to one of the faro tables, and betting ready money rather than be bothered with chips, fell to playing after a modest fashion.

Eli Jacks and one or two less prominent members of the Kellar gang were engaged at that same table—which, indeed, was the main reason why Houghton selected that particular lay-out—but to all seeming they never knew who was now chipping in, while the sport had no wish to call particular attention his way.

Standing at table rather than taking a chair, his extreme height making it an easy matter for him to bend over and place or remove his stakes, for some little time Houghton merely played to kill time and cover his waiting for the wished-for information.

But, almost from the start, fortune smiled upon this careless player, and as bet after bet came his way, the giant sport gradually became interested in the game, even as his success called attention to him.

A faint smile flitted across his stern face as Houghton caught a whisper or two, for flattery is by no means disagreeable even to the best of us, but presently there came a change over the scene.

Other whispers and plainer mutterings

became audible to those keen ears, some of them the reverse of complimentary, others even taking on the guise of threats, thinly veiled and vicious.

Nothing in his face or bearing gave evidence, but the giant sport quickly became convinced that trouble of some description was surely brewing, and that it would be the part of wisdom on his side to withdraw from the Alhambra ere worse came of it.

But he was hardly a man to turn tail from danger, and he heard just sufficient to nettle his temper.

Then, too, so long as the gang was held interested here, they certainly could work no harm elsewhere.

To all seeming, the Man of Muscle was deaf to those ugly hints, playing on with steady nerve and unchanging face, hardly casting a glance around him, giving all his care and attention to the wise placing of his bets and to keeping tab on the cards left in yonder silver box.

This outward indifference lent fresh courage to his enemies, however, and they spoke in barely veiled tones of foul assassins, and those who stood in with them.

The end of the deal was drawing nigh, and as the faro dealer made known that fact, pausing for those who wished to take a flyer at "calling the turn," Houghton placed a fair bet, then waited to see how his judgment would pan out.

He "caught the turn," and was just closing hand on the stakes as paid, when he heard a voice say distinctly:

"The dog who tries to shield an assassin like Rod Church ought to hang on the same gallows, and here's a hand to pull that same rope!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE GIANT SPORT ON HIS MUSCLE.

There was no room for doubting the mark at which those words were aimed, and as by instinct Carlos knew that the storm was about to break.

He turned his face quickly that way, recognizing Eli Jacks as the speaker, that same glance showing him the gambler had his right hand on his pistol-butt.

Swift as thought Jacks jerked his gun from its scabbard, making a bold play to catch the drop on which so much depends when rivals mean pure business.

The Man of Muscle was just closing his fingers on the little stack of gold and silver coin which the faro dealer had shoved alongside his winning "call," and with marvelous swiftness he hurled the lot squarely into the face of his insulter, at the same instant ducking low and to one side as far as the table would permit.

The revolver barked, but thanks to that novel shield, its lead sped wild, while its wielder reeled back with a savage cry, blinded by that golden hail, his face cut to the bone in a dozen different places.

With an activity bewildering in one of such huge bulk, the Man of Muscle followed up his throw, knowing full well that Eli Jacks would not assail him single-handed.

Clutching the blinded gambler as he rushed, Houghton swung him clear of the floor, just in time to meet and foil the combined assault of at least two members of the Kellar gang.

They were Dick Whiffler and his side partner, Jerry Mixture, both of them armed with ugly knives and coming with a rush to double-bank the Man of Muscle, while he was engaged with Eli Jacks.

Caught by the arms close up to his body, the gambler was whirled around in a dizzying circle, then flung lengthwise through the air with terrible force, fairly mowing down all before the novel catapult.

First fell the two pards, yelling and cursing, taken wholly aback by this marvelous display of muscle, completely demoralized by such sudden defeat.

Eli Jacks fell on top of the heap, and his revolver exploded again in the wild confusion, closely followed by a scream of savage agony from out that writhing heap of limbs and bodies, telling only too plainly that some one had caught the lead besides the man for whom 'twas intended.

Up to this moment the giant sport had thought only of saving his own life against

that thinly-veiled plot to assassinate him ere he could defend himself, but now he sprang across to the blank wall where none could approach from the rear, whipping forth his revolvers and covering that confused crowd, speaking in tones which made themselves heard even above all that tumult.

"Steady, all hands! Take notice that those knaves tried to double-bank me, but that I never fired a shot in return nor drew a gun until after some person got hurt! Now—clear up the muss, some of you!"

"I can bear witness to just that same," called out one of the citizens, who had been taking a quiet flyer at the faro-table, merely as a convenient method of killing an otherwise idle hour.

"Thanks, Stephenson," called out the Man of Muscle, yet standing on his guard, not knowing at what moment that treacherous attack might be duplicated.

"Don't— Oh, I'm shot—all to pieces!" cried one of the men tangled up in that confused heap near the middle of the floor.

"Let up, curse ye! Let up, or I'll knife—ugh!"

Then, as though separated by some inward convulsion, that confused mass opened, and men began scrambling to their feet, wild-eyed and hardly conscious of just how they came so, but leaving behind them a groaning, cursing wretch there in his blood.

"It's Jerry Mixture!"

"He's got it—got it bad, too!"

"Who shot him? Why don't— Bear a hand, ye crazy fools!"

The air was fairly filled with similar cries and questions and confused orders, but no man seemed to know just what step to take first.

All could see that Jerry Mixture was injured, seemingly too badly hurt to help himself, but beyond that few could reason just then.

Carlos Houghton shifted his guns so as to cover Eli Jacks and Dick Whiffler when those worthies extricated themselves from that mass, but neither gambler seemed capable of following up their desperate attempt on his life, acting as though that fall had hopelessly mixed up their wits.

Just then the tall, gaunt shape of the Vigilante chief appeared at the front door, hand on revolver-butt, as his keen gray eyes flashed over the scene for an instant before calling out in stern tones:

"What's all this yer' row about, anyhow? Who's b'in shootin', an' what fer?"

"You're just the man most wanted, Ironwood," quickly cried the Man of Muscle, still standing on his guard but lowering the muzzles of his guns now that the danger seemed lessening.

"You, is it, Mr. Houghton?" harshly spoke the leader of the Law and Order party, as he strode that way, his pistol coming forth from its scabbard, ready for swift use in case of need. "I might 'a' knowed it, 'thout axin', though! You're jest ee-tarnally mixin' up in a row now—ays, an' ef I was to—"

"He didn't begin the row, Ironwood," generously called out the citizen who had before spoken up on behalf of the giant sport.

"Thanks, Stephenson! And you, Mr. Ironwood, don't try to hitch up your critter tail-to, please! I'm mild as mother's milk ordinarily, but just now— I'll kill the first fool who tries to trample on my corns!"

The giant sport seemed thoroughly aroused now, and, as he caught sight of Eli Jacks plainly trying to "make a sneak of it," he leaped in that direction, once more whirling the burly gambler off his feet and high into the air, then dashing him to the floor with a violence that caused the building to shake and jar in its every timber.

"Stay put, you infernal snake!" Houghton cried, sternly, once more backing to the wall and standing on his guard with a pistol gripped by each hand.

Only for that friendly word put in by Stephenson, the Man of Muscle might have fared poorly at the hands of the Vigilante chief while thus engaged, for his guns followed that mass of electric nerve

and energy, and but the crooking of a forefinger was needed to cut short both rush and life as well.

After this, however, matters took on a more peaceable aspect.

Eli Jacks was stunned past making further mischief for the time being. Dick Whiffler was thoroughly cowed, and Jerry Mixture lay groaning and cursing and pleading all in a single breath, his right knee badly shattered by that accidental shot from the pistol of his pard.

By this time, too, others who had been eyewitnesses of the whole affair were quite ready to tell all interested in the row just how it had started, and how Jerry Mixture had come by his hurt.

This, of course, completely exonerated the giant sport, and as soon as he could do so without laying himself open to the charge of dodging his share of responsibility, Houghton spoke to John Ironwood, who was now looking after the crippled gambler.

"If I'm wanted for anything more, sir, you'll find me at my hotel. Only— Come without guns in your fist unless you're really anxious to help fill the hospital!"

The Man of Muscle kept well on guard while leaving the Alhambra, for now that the ice had been broken by this desperate attempt to down him for good and all, he knew not how soon his life might be aimed at again.

No one attempted to hinder his orderly retreat, however, and when once out beneath the stars, Houghton smiled grimly enough as his thoughts turned toward the now far-away stage and its precious burden.

"Even if I had come off less lucky, 'twould be well worth it all! She's safe by now, and for the rest— Well, I'm only one against a crowd, but here's betting I'll come out on top of the heap in the end!"

"Only, where can that infernal Kellar be to-night?"

That was the one "spider in his dumping."

The giant sport picked his way through the poorly lighted streets to his hotel, reaching there without meeting further adventure.

He went up to his room, preferring his own company to that which he might have found by entering the hotel office.

He knew he had done all that lay in his power so far as covering the flight of Rodney's sister was concerned, and now, with mind fairly at rest on that score, he sat down on the edge of his bed in the dark, running over the various points of the case, making up his mind as to his next move.

Although he held the pledge given by John Ironwood on behalf of the Vigilance Committee that he might safely count on a brief grace during which he might fathom the mystery still surrounding the death of Tom Hooper, recent events plainly proved that he ought not to place any great reliance upon that agreement.

When ought he to make the attempt to reunite brother and sister?

"I might make a sneak of it yet, this night, I reckon," a portion of his musings ran, as he sat there in the darkness, staring vacantly through the narrow window near the foot of his bed. "But—ought I?"

As yet he could hardly determine what action John Ironwood and his Vigilantes might see fit to take anent this latest affair.

True, he had been assailed, and that after a most vicious manner, both front and rear. Equally true that he had not fired even a shot in self-defense, although one of the toughs had been seriously wounded.

"But say I was to rack out between two suns, wouldn't they paint me too black for any sort of use? Wouldn't they— Hello! What's broken loose now?"

Springing to the window, the giant sport leaned forth with eagerly strained ears, noting the rapid clatter of a horse's hoofs on the stony ground, coming nearer the hotel. And then—

"Help! Deuce to pay, boys!" he caught the hoarse cry from that wild rider, and, recognizing the tones of Morris Bogard, who had taken out the Smackover stage,

he hastened as rapidly as possible down to the outer air, there to receive one of the heaviest blows ever dealt a mortal man.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CAPTAIN CLUTCH'S DEADLY SWOOP.

Quickly as he took action, Carlos Houghton found others before him when he reached the level below, for the panting horse had been stopped in front of the hotel, and friendly hands were helping the wounded driver down, uttering little cries of angry wonder as they found his garments literally soaked with his own warm blood.

"What's happened?" almost fiercely demanded the giant sport, as he leaped forth from the hotel door. "Where's your passengers, driver?"

"Satan's own work!" huskily groaned the poor fellow, hanging limply and unnerved upon those friendly hands. "Cap'n Clutch—murdered 'em all—all dead an'—ah-h!"

With another gasping moan the brave fellow swooned from loss of blood, leaving all confusion worse confounded for the moment.

As for Carlos Houghton, he seemed like one smitten a stunning blow.

He staggered back, one hand pressed tightly over his madly-leaping heart, its mate gripping convulsively at his throat. He seemed suffocating, and for a few seconds all was a bloody blur around him.

With Morris Bogard a dead weight upon their hands, seemingly a dying man, the landlord and his few cronies who happened to be first within call, seemed unable to think of aught beyond the present; but then the Man of Muscle rallied, giving a mighty roar as he did so.

"Rouse the town! Turn out, every white man! Get horses and follow! The stage has been held up and murder done! Come—we've played our long enough, and now it's wolf!"

Even if the alarm had not already begun to spread, that mighty roar and fierce slogan surely would have turned out all Peculiar; but Carlos Houghton wasted no moments in looking for backers, rushing hot-foot to the stable where his good steed was waiting, throwing on the saddle and bridle with marvelous rapidity, then leading Chief forth to leap upon his back and repeat that fierce cry:

"Wake up, men of Peculiar! Captain Clutch has painted the hills red again, and now— All who refuse to join in his death hunt are either curs, cowards, or criminals!"

"Come! Follow on the road as fast as ye know how! Your friends have been butchered, or— Come, I say!"

His voice choked with intense passion, and wheeling sharply to the rightabout, Houghton sped away through the night, heading for—what?

If Morris Bogard had only held out a little longer!

If he had been able to tell a more connected story; to state just when and where and how the awful thing had happened!

And—what of Iva Church?

There lay the keenest pang of all, and as he raced on through the night, thinking of what might have befallen her, Carlos grew sick at heart and faint with awful dread.

"And—I sent her away!" he said, with a smothered groan of agony such as he had never before experienced. "I hurried her off, thinking how cunningly I was befooling the devils who— What devils?"

And then the handsome face of Hugh Kellar seemed to rise up before him, smiling with fiendish triumph.

Only a vision caused by a sadly-disturbed brain, yet— Was it not the shadow of the truth?

Meanwhile friendly hands had carried the swooning driver into the bar of the hotel, there doing all that lay in their power for the poor fellow, whom they found shot in three several places.

Neither wound appeared to be mortal in itself, but the flow of blood had been excessive, and all combined would make it very precarious for Bogard.

Some one raised the rallying cry of the Vigilantes, and with brief delay John Iron-

wood appeared on the scene and took charge for lack of one better fitted to fill the position.

At his sharp commands the members of the Law and Order League at once began making preparations for a prolonged campaign, should such prove necessary, and while they were thus engaged, every effort was made to restore the injured driver to consciousness and so learn just what had taken place after the stage left Peculiar.

That proved to be no slight task, but stimulants were abundant, and fortunately Morris was known to be a "mighty tough nut," so steps were taken with him which would hardly have been risked with one of less rugged constitution.

Before the Vigilance Committee were fully ready to take saddle, the driver opened his heavy eyes, showing signs of returning consciousness.

After that 'twas but a question of care and nursing, and pretty soon John Ironwood was putting questions and receiving answers.

Putting that broken, incoherent story together, it ran about as follows:

All had gone as usual with the stage until Three Pine Cut was reached, but there they were held up by Captain Clutch and his lawless Crooks.

The attack did not come after the regulation manner, but the first inkling of serious trouble came in the shape of a volley of shots which dropped the span of lead-horses right in their tracks!

"Thar' wasn't no yell fur to throw up hands," huskily groaned the wounded driver, turning restlessly in quest of an easier position. "An' afore I well knowed thar' was trouble in the air 'twas all over us in great gobs!"

He had yelled out his submission the instant those first shots dropped his leaders, but, if heard, no attention was paid his words.

Other firing followed swiftly, and he felt as though he was being turned into a leaking riddle.

"I jest tuck a tumble, gents, fer I couldn't do no less," Bogard continued, after another sip of whisky. "Peared like I was split wide open from stem to starn an' all the way back ag'in!"

"And the passengers?" asked the landlord, anxiously, yet like one who dreads to hear the answer. "The—the young lady, Bogard?"

"I don't know fer sure, but—'pears like I see her, or hear'n her squawk, or— Ary-ho, thar' was Uncle 'Lias—an' he went down like—jest riddled!"

Then the driver of the stage said he lost all consciousness, and could tell nothing more of what happened there at the stage.

When he recovered his senses, however, the road-agents had gone, and, so far as he could see, no other living soul was near. He knew that one or two corpses were lying near, for he crawled against one before he fairly knew what he was doing.

"Then I cut the boss loose—'twas the only one left livin', an' he was down like he'd got his last sickness, too; throwed when his mate fell, I reckon."

Then he told how he contrived to drag himself to the back of the surviving horse, heading for Peculiar, deeming it his duty to lose as little time as might be in giving the alarm and setting the Vigilantes to work.

All this bit by bit, with intervals of deathly faintness, when even such an emergency would not warrant one in crowding a man, John Ironwood gleaned from the lips of poor Morris Bogard, and when he had all the information possible to gather, his men were in readiness to take the field after Captain Clutch and his murderous Crooks.

That delay had been comparatively brief, considering all that had been attended to, but as a matter of course, Carlos Houghton had long since passed out of sight and hearing, riding at breakneck speed, ignorant as to the exact location of that bloody hold-up, yet knowing that he must sooner or later reach the spot so long as he stuck to the regular trail.

That swift race through the cool night air served in a measure to calm his wild

excitement, leaving him all the more dangerous as an enemy, all the more efficient as a friend and rescuer.

His sole thought was of Iva Church and how she might have fared at the hands of Captain Clutch.

Only a few brief days before a perfect stranger, but now—she had grown very close to his heart, and for the first time in his life Carlos Houghton knew what it was to love with the love of a husband.

Not knowing how long poor Bogard had lain insensible there on the trail, Houghton came upon the stage far sooner than he anticipated, giving a low, hoarse cry as he recognized its outlines, the bodies of the slaughtered horses, and—yes!

Yonder lay a human body!

Leaping out of the saddle and letting Chief run free, the giant spotter bent over that body, giving a smothered oath as he recognized Uncle 'Lias Perkins, bleeding freely, seemingly a corpse!

A swift look around failed to reveal any other bodies, and with a slightly lessened dread Houghton turned toward the stage, one hand grasping the door as he looked inside—to see another victim of that grim raid!

This proved to be the body of a male, unknown to the sport, but plainly a passenger who had met his death by the reckless firing which had fairly riddled the coach from all sides.

There were no signs of Iva Church, and greatly as captivity in such vile hands was to be deplored, Carlos felt that it was several degrees preferable to death outright.

And then, with hardly a hope of learning anything new, the giant spotter turned to Uncle 'Lias, looking for his wounds, and—

"Alive, by glory!"

It was true. Life still lingered in that body, and Houghton fell to work with feverish energy over the graybeard, hoping to not only save his life, but to learn from his lips just what manner of fate had befallen the fair girl placed in his charge.

Fortunately Houghton carried a pocket-flask, and with the aid of the strong liquor he presently brought the old miner back to his senses, although Uncle 'Lias seemed dazed for the time being.

But then, when his wits had time to grow clearer, and he recognized the face bending over him, he huskily yet distinctly muttered:

"Run the devil down! He's— Cap'n Clutch is Hugh Kellar!"

CHAPTER XXV.

WORDS WITH THE BARK ON.

It seemed as though the effort to denounce Peculiar's sport exhausted the poor fellow, for Uncle 'Lias lay back, gasping for breath, sick and faint once more.

In vain the giant sport questioned him further, trying the best he knew how to glean some positive information concerning the fate of Iva Church; Perkins would groan and move restlessly, showing clearly enough that he understood what was being said, but was unable to answer.

Three Pine Cut was a gloomy, lonesome spot, and to one no better supplied than Carlos Houghton it was almost folly to think of looking for a trail or other sign ere the sun should rise again.

But search he did, using the stock of matches which he habitually carried as a moderate user of the weed, even putting together a few strips of dry bark to form a torch.

That proved to be a miserable makeshift, and more than once he considered the advisability of riding back to Peculiar for a lantern, by aid of which he might anticipate the dawn of day, and only for a hope that some of the Vigilantes would come up thus prepared, no doubt the giant sport would have taken some such action.

As it was, he failed to make any important discoveries, although he found where the road-agents had waited in ambush for the stage, as was fairly proved by the "sign" left behind by their tethered animals.

He found no other bodies, and being in ignorance as to the number of passengers taken out of Peculiar by the Smackover

stage, he could make no sure guess as to the full extent of that tragedy.

One thing seemed fairly certain—Iva Church had been carried away by Captain Clutch and his Crooks, for ransom or for—What?

If Uncle 'Lias was correct in his assertion that Captain Clutch was none other than Hugh Kellar, that query was easily answered.

"Playing for the New Find, curse him! With Whooping Tom dead, Rodney a fugitive under the ban of the gallows, and Iva in his power— Oh, you devil! I'll tear the cunning mask from your grinning mug, even yet!"

The giant spotter was still trying to find sign or trail when he caught the first sounds of approaching hoofs, and he was at the stage when John Ironwood dashed up at the head of his men.

"Have you brought a lantern with you?" sharply called out the Man of Muscle, almost ere the Vigilantes came within sight of the spot.

That proved to be one of the things lacking, as so often will happen, and for a brief period Houghton was too fiercely disappointed to do or say aught more.

By virtue of his office as head of the Law and Order League, John Ironwood assumed full command of matters, and while such aid as lay in their power was being afforded Uncle 'Lias, he ordered the stage turned around and drawn clear of the dead horses, the harness removed to be fitted upon a couple of those just ridden from town.

"It's a blamed shame we didn't think to fetch a doctor," he admitted, with a growl of self-disgust. "Pears like we went off at half-cock, this time! But— Git down to work, lads!"

Under his direction springy poles were cut and fastened lengthwise within the coach, layers of leafy twigs being placed thereon and the whole tied fast with thongs and portions of the extra sets of harness.

Over this coats were placed, all forming a fairly comfortable litter for the sorely-wounded prospector.

While these arrangements were being made for the removal of Uncle 'Lias Perkins to Peculiar with as little risk as might be, Houghton sent a well-mounted fellow back for lanterns, bidding him ride and spare not, promising him reward sufficient to buy half a dozen fresh mounts if need be, just so he made all possible haste.

When the coach was ready for its slow journey back to Peculiar, two horses hitched to the pole, the wounded man lying upon that rude, yet effective contrivance with a friendly guard on each side to keep him as steady as possible during the trip, Carlos Houghton made one more effort to learn more concerning the maiden in whom he felt such a powerful interest.

Uncle 'Lias had been given several sips of whisky as a "bracer" to enable him to stand the trip better, and now seemed brighter than he had at any time since found weltering in his own blood.

But he was too weak for much talk, and hardly seemed capable of comprehending the questions asked by the giant sport.

He muttered once or twice, but only once could Houghton catch aught which could throw any further light upon that tragedy.

"Hugh Kellar— Devil! Took her for— New Find an'— Kill him, or she's— Gone sucker!"

With gloomy face and fiercely-glowing eyes Carlos watched the stage as it slowly rolled away, feeling how sadly impotent man is at times.

Although there was really little that could be done so long as the dawn held off or they were no better supplied with material for hunting a sign than now, Houghton found it impossible to remain idle while waiting for the return of his messenger from town, and with another improvised torch he passed here and there, searching for something which might give at least an inkling of the fate which had overtaken his loved one.

This protracted search gave him time for studying over the situation, and to measure at their full value the husky words let fall by Uncle 'Lias

Was Hugh Kellar indeed Captain Clutch, or had the Peculiar sport merely assumed that disguise the better to carry out his infamous plans for winning the New Find?

Certain it is that Kellar was not at the head of the gang when the Smackover stage was held up on a former occasion, when the robbery was foiled by the coming of Houghton himself.

But, leaving aside that particular question, was this but part of a deep-laid scheme to gain full possession of the New Find?

Had it begun with the murder of Tom Hooper, the attempted lynching of Rodney Church, the other partner in that rich claim?

And now—Iva?

Puzzling over all this, Houghton nevertheless managed to pick up enough sign to lay out the general course of retreat taken by that marauding gang before anything was heard from Peculiar.

Then, when shouts and clattering of hoof-strokes announced the coming up of reinforcements, not only the giant sport, but the large majority of Vigilantes gathered at yonder bloodstained spot, eager to greet and to avail themselves of the lanterns sent for.

A number of citizens had borne the messenger company on his return, one and all seeming eager to avenge that outrage upon the infamous gang of Crooks, but Carlos Houghton had eyes and thoughts for only a single member of that little company.

Hugh Kellar!

At first glimpse the Man of Muscle could scarcely believe his eyes, but there was no room left for doubting when the gambler's voice was heard, asking John Ironwood what luck so far.

Stern and pale-faced, the sport strode up to the spot where the two men were now standing, and in harsh tones he demanded:

"Where the foul fiend did you come from, Hugh Kellar?"

"Where should I come from?" asked the amazed gambler, recoiling slightly, but making no move toward a weapon. "From town, where—"

"You lie!"

"What!"

"Stiddy, men!" and John Ironwood stepped in between, a hand going out on either side, as though to place both under arrest. "This hain't no time fer fightin' atwixt ourselves, while Cap'n Clutch is—"

"Captain Clutch is right under your grip now, John Ironwood!" sternly cut in the giant sport, his finger pointing to that pale and hard-set face just beyond the Vigilante chief. "There he is—Hugh Kellar!"

This fierce accusation caused a sensation among all within ear-shot of the trio, but Kellar himself broke into a laugh of scorn, and then spoke:

"Is this fellow crazy, John, or merely drunk?"

"Talk to me, you cur, not through another man!" quickly cried the sport, seeming to grow taller and wider until he fairly towered above his enemy. "You may not be the original Captain Clutch, but you played his part here to-night! You held up the stage— You butchered the passengers— You carried off Miss Church in order to—"

"I deny it, every word, Mr. Houghton," cut in the gambler, coldly, his tones ringing forth clear and distinct.

"And I repeat it, every word!"

"Stiddy, men!" once more interposed Ironwood, holding himself as a double shield against shots. "This hain't no time fer to pull wool! Ef you cain't git 'long 'thout squabblin', wait ontel later, when—"

"When I'll prove Carlos Houghton a liar, and make him eat his words at the muzzle of a gun," sternly added the gambler. "First, however, we owe a sacred duty to others; a woman is in sore peril, and until she can be rescued from that peril no man has a right to either throw away his life or take that of another."

Hugh Kellar spoke swiftly and clearly, every sentence winning favor from the interested gathering, and then, as though he had time for that sacred duty alone, he turned away to join in the quest.

Carlos was fiercely tempted to leap upon

his enemy and fairly shake the truth out of him, but he was yet sufficiently clear-witted to realize how surely that action would put him in the wrong with the crowd.

It seemed the height of folly to charge Hugh Kellar with being the notorious road-agent, and, after all, what proof could he advance to back up that accusation?

Only the broken mutterings of a wounded, perhaps dying, old man!

Choking back his fierce anger as best he could, Houghton spoke in low, stern tones to the chief of the Vigilantes before turning away to take part in that renewed search:

"Mark my words, Mr. Ironwood, Kellar was at the head of this hold-up, for Uncle 'Lias swore to him as Captain Clutch. Bear that in mind, and if anything happens so I can't fetch the dog to taw, probe the matter yourself!"

Ironwood began a protest, but Houghton did not wait to hear him out.

Claiming one of the three lanterns brought from Peculiar, the giant spotter hurried over to where he had marked down that retreat, then fell to work with feverish energy, picking up the trail now with fair celerity.

For some little time it was fair sailing, the spoor being sufficiently plain for ready following, but then the work grew more and more difficult as the nature of the ground changed.

Still, some progress was being made, and each yard won would be just so much gained over waiting for the coming of dawn.

When a couple or more miles had been covered after this fashion, the trail suddenly split up, everything going to show that the gang of road-agents had concluded to make pursuit useless through scattering, each man taking the course that suited him best.

So it seemed, yet there was a fair chance that the broken trail would soon be reunited as before, and, acting on this hope, the search party likewise divided.

John Ironwood took command of the larger portion but quite a number seemed most to fancy the course taken by the giant sport, who bent low over the ground, lantern in hand, giving his every care and thought to the trail.

Led on by an occasional sign, Houghton found encouragement at every few rods, quickening his pace as he followed that general course in hopes of finding the main trail once more.

Instead, these signs led him to the very brink of a deep gulch or precipice, just how deep his lantern failed to reveal as he leaned over the dizzy brink to peer downward.

Then— Something struck him heavily on the head, knocking him over the escarpment, to plunge blindly downward!

CHAPTER XXVI.

SAVED AS BY A MIRACLE.

Viciously meant though that treacherous blow surely was, it lacked force sufficient to hinder a loud cry from escaping the lips of the endangered sport, and that sound quickly drew others to the spot.

The disappearance of the lantern guided their steps, for several of their number could swear to its location but a moment or two before that alarm was given.

Then they halted with cries of horror, for they could no longer doubt the truth; the giant sport had fallen over this precipice, and doubtless had been dashed to pieces on the rocks far below!

"It's two hundred feet deep if a foot!" ejaculated one of the men from Peculiar, who evidently recognized the place. "Holy smoke! If he was even to— What's that?"

A hoarse shout coming from— Whence? "Here—help!" again came that cry, now sounding clearer and more surely located. "I'm over the rocks, but— Help, men!"

A brief pause as of stupefaction, then a united shout broke from the search party who had drifted along in the rear of the giant sport in preference to following Ironwood and his Vigilantes.

Some of them moved closer to the pre-

ipice, leaning over the brink, or else lying flat on their stomachs to peer over and downward with less risk to themselves; but one and all were intensely excited and unable as yet to realize just what had taken place.

"Where be ye? Who is it, anyway?" called out one of the citizens.

"Here. Houghton. Caught my foot in a bush, and— Fetch lights and a rope— Quick! I'll pull loose, and— Make haste, will you?"

By this time the alarm had spread to the other party, and, fancying from the shouts and cries that the enemy had been jumped from cover by some lucky chance, the Vigilantes came hurrying that way, gaunt John Ironwood leading them now, as ever.

"What's the row, critters?" he demanded, disappointed in his hopes of a brisk brush with the Crooks. "Who's yelpin' like— Wal, now!"

For again that stern appeal for aid came floating hoarsely up out of the darkness, and Ironwood was no less amazed than had been the other men of Peculiar.

Still, he was swifter to take definite action than they had been, and when he failed in his attempt to cast light sufficient downward to reveal just how the luckless sport was situated, he quickly called into play other methods.

As a rule the Peculiar Vigilantes never went abroad without a fair supply of ropes, and now one of these was put to a far more merciful use than at first contemplated.

Tying one end through the lantern ring, a light was lowered over the precipice at the point marked by that appeal for help, and a few seconds later those eager ones lining the escarpment could see just how perilously suspended was the giant sport.

His escape from instant death seemed nothing less than miraculous.

A dozen feet below that level he hung, head downward, one foot caught in a forked bush, which now bent dangerously far over under his weight.

A couple of inches to the right or the left of that precise spot would have missed the fork and then— Death, sure and hideous!

"A pretty show for a cent, gentlemen," coolly called up the Man of Muscle, "but if it makes no particular difference to you, suppose we do something else? Send down a rope, for instance?"

"Hold fast, man!" shouted back the chief of Vigilantes. "We'll rig a purchase, an' hang on fer ye'r life!"

"If my leg don't pull out, or this crotch take a split!"

"Kin you grup a rope, pardner?" asked Ironwood, his fingers working swiftly the while.

"Try me once!"

Although the giant sport was displaying a rare degree of nerve, all could see that he was suffering severely, if only from that rush of blood to the head.

But willing hands were working rapidly and intelligently, and ere many more moments passed a deftly looped lariat was being lowered close to the imperiled sport's face.

Houghton caught it eagerly, slipping the loop over his head and up to pass under one arm, thus forming a secure guard in case his foot should slip or the fork split beneath his great weight.

The rest was comparatively easy when operations were directed by a cool head like John Ironwood's.

There was no lack of strong hands to pull upon the rope, and slowly at first until that foot was freed from the bush, then more rapidly the rope was hauled in, bringing with it the Man of Muscle.

"Stiddy, pardner!" cried the Vigilante chief, as he fastened his grip on the sport's collar the instant he came within reach of that strong hand. "Now—up ye come, like a mouse!"

Carlos was drawn up to the level without further difficulty, but when he found himself on solid footing once more, he sank down at the side of the boulder, eyes closing, face pale as that of a corpse.

This unusual pallor seemed all the more pronounced from the fact that a little

streak of blood marked his right cheek, trickling drop by drop from a scalp-wound on that side of his head.

"You're feelin' fainty, pardner, an' no wonder!" said Ironwood, as he proffered a flask of whisky. "Jest take a weenty drap to brace ye up."

Houghton shook his head without speaking, but as he leaned back against the boulder, his gray eyes roved quickly around as though looking for some face or person in particular.

"How did ye come to tumble, aryhow, Houghton?" asked the chief of Vigilantes, curiously. "Foot slip, or—"

"Where's Hugh Kellar?" suddenly asked the giant sport, rising to his feet with renewed life and energy, hand on revolver as he spoke.

"Here I am; what's wanted?" promptly replied the person named, stepping forward without the slightest show of fear or of doubt.

For a brief space the rivals stood face to face without another word or another movement. Then Houghton spoke, addressing Ironwood:

"There's your answer, John! I neither slipped nor tumbled of my own accord, for— Here's the mark of a coward's blow, and right there stands the whelp of Satan who struck me from behind!"

His left hand pointed direct at Hugh Kellar while his right clasped a revolver, the weapon slipping out its holster like magic.

There would have been a killing then only for the superb coolness or meek moderation displayed by the Peculiar sport.

He never flinched from that accusation, and his only movement served to bring his empty hands into plainer evidence.

Either he was doubly armed in his consciousness of innocence or else he knew that any movement toward drawing a weapon or jumping for cover would surely call forth a death shot from that ready gun.

"I deny the charge, gentlemen," he said, in clear, even tones, which carried conviction to many within earshot. "I was not even near this spot when—"

"You lie, Hugh Kellar! You stole up behind me, too currish to face a man, and struck me down. You counted on the rocks over yonder to kill me and cover over your secret, but—"

"Easy, Houghton!" and once again John Ironwood interposed on behalf of the gambler. "Mebbe you was knocked over—"

"I swear it, and that Hugh Kellar dealt the cowardly blow!"

"Right thar's whar' you're wrong, pardner," gravely cut in the chief of Vigilantes, a friendly grip closing upon that arm and pushing the menacing weapon aside, thanks to the shock of surprise which his next words conveyed to the giant sport.

"I kin prove you wrong, Houghton, for jest the moment afore you give that fu'st yelp, I was talkin' to Kellar, 'way over yender!"

"What?"

"I mean it, Houghton," was the earnest response. "I called to Hugh Kellar, an' he answered me; so thar' isn't ary room left fer makin' a mistake on our side!"

Carlos stood irresolute, yet permitting his pistol arm to be borne down and to one side. He gazed keenly at his enemy, by no means convinced that he had accused the gambler wrongfully, yet disarmed by the certainty that John Ironwood would not blacken his soul with a lie to shield even his dearest friend or relative.

"Do you say this same thing, Mr. Kellar?" the sport asked, after a brief silence.

"I have denied the charge once, and that is enough; more than you deserve," coldly retorted the Peculiar sport, turning away like one scorning to parley further.

"All right. I'll bide my time, and wait to catch you red-handed," as coldly threatened the big fellow.

The search for the lost trail was renewed and prosecuted for some little time without further incident worth recording.

But then Hugh Kellar received a far from agreeable surprise in the shape of a muttered communication from one of the men from Peculiar.

"Jest a word, boss," said this fellow, when none other was within easy ear-shot. "You know me, don't ye, Mr. Kellar?"

"Jack Farley? Yes. What is it now?"

"Wal, boss, I've bi'n wonderin' whether or no I hedn't ought fer to tell the big feller, yender, or mebbe the hull crowd—"

"Tell them what, Farley?"

"That old John called me by your name, over yender, jest afore the sport yelped out! An'— Wal, jest fer luck I answered him back like it was jest you!"

"You mean it, Jack?"

"An' kin prove it, sir, by tellin' Ironwood what he ax'ed me, fer you. But, would tellin' pay me fer my trouble, I wonder?"

"Silence will pay you better, I dare say," assured the gambler, at the same time offering a sum of money in bills. "Of course, Houghton lied in accusing me, but I'd rather not have an open row with him right now. Come to me when that is gone, and maybe I can find more like it about my clothes."

"Jes' so, boss, an' on goes the button!" chuckled the fellow, softly.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A PAIR OF COVETOUS KNAVES.

The daybreak for which Carlos Houghton was so longing, came upon a little party deep in the hills, far from any human habitation or, as it seemed, any likelihood of intrusion from human feet.

One of that number was none other than Iva Church, who had met with so many unusual trials since leaving Smack-over for Peculiar only such a brief while before.

Pale and haggard, showing traces of fright and fatigue far beyond the ordinary, the young woman now half sat, half reclined against a low shelf of dirt, shaded by a few low-growing trees.

Near by was a small fire, over which an early morning meal had been cooked, and from the remains of which yet curled upward a wavering column of grayish smoke.

Not far away, squatting where they held full command of the little camp, as well as the maiden whose ankles were in bonds, two ill-favored fellows were smoking pipes and conversing in guarded tones.

The frequent looks cast toward Iva seemed to indicate her as being the subject matter for that talk, and such proved to be the case.

"The idee of it is jest like this, pardner," one of the knaves was saying, tapping the open palm of his hand with a chewed pipe-stem. "Thar's heap big money into it, ef so be a feller was to work it up in good shape."

"Heap big risk, too!"

"That all counts in as part o' the day's work, of course. A gent cain't 'xpect fer to make his pile now'days 'thout takin' his chaintes. An' me fer one's mighty ready fer to run the resk fer what's to be got out of the job. Eh, pardner?"

"Thar's the cap'n, mate."

"The cap'n won't make anybody rich, 'cept it is him own self, an' ef we kin foolish him in the barg'in, why not?"

"How kin ye turn the trick, though, Mack?"

"Wal, now, pardner, ye see the idee of it all is jest like this," repeated the more crafty knave, growing more eager as he grew more confidential. "Thar's the gal, I reckon?"

"A fool kin see so much!"

"Then I don't need fer to pi'nt her out to you, Top. But jest you pick them ears open, an' give your clapper a rest. I'm talkin'!"

"Then why don't ye say somethin'?"

"That's all right, an' thar's solid stuff to back up all I'm sayin', too! Now— Right hyar ye ketch onto the 'hull nubbin, Top!"

"What's the cap'n botherin' with a gal fer? Beca'se he 'lows to make big money out of her, in course!"

"How does he figger that out? 'Long of her bein' sister to young Church, an' him ownin' of the New Find! See?"

"Hold her ontel he kin git his price fer givin' of her back, eh?"

"Eyther that, or make her hitch up in double harness, then clam the 'hull blamed business a'ter seein' Rod Church go hang!"

"Now, pardner, what's the matter with us offering to let the gal go free at a lower price than the cap'n would ax'? Wouldn't she jump at the offer, say we was to swear heap-big that the boss 'lowed fer to play her dirt all over? Eh? Say?"

"Wal, now, Mack, she does begin fer to look that way, honest!"

"Course she looks that way! An' so— What say, Top? Shell we keep right on playin' sheepdog fer the boss, an' him not keerin' a runty blame what comes of us, or ef we ever git wages 'nough fer to keep us in 'rot-gut an' smoke-terbac? Or, shell we let him go shake, an' make our little pile out of the madam yender?"

"Mebbe she won't milk, Mack?"

"Don't you fool ye'rself, pardner! She'll come down in big streams ef we play the right keerd, an'— Jest you watch me make a start now!"

Evidently in love with his own bold idea, Mack rose to his feet and moved across to where Iva Church was sitting helpless, smiling after his blandest fashion as he pulled off that battered old felt and addressed the captive:

"I say, ma'am, pard an' me've bi'n sort o' 'cussin' this matter all over sence sun-up, an' this 'pears to be the idee of it all."

"This hain't the sort o' treatment a nice young leddy like you'd ought fer to ketch, ma'am, an' so— Eh?"

"Am I not helpless?" asked Iva, despondently. "Oh, sir! If you would only let me go free before that—that awful man comes back!"

Mack lifted his hat far enough to mask a grin of pleasure, then spoke like one who felt no particular love for the being alluded to, although forced by circumstances to train under his orders.

"Wal, ma'am, the cap'n hain't plum' a saint, an' that's a fact! Ef you knowed him like we pore devils do, but I reckon you'll see fer your own self 'fore long, too! When he comes back—"

"If he is so wicked, why do you serve him, sir?" asked Iva, with a ray of hope making itself seen and felt.

"Wal, madam, even pore devils like me'n pard yender hes to make a sort o' livin' into this yer' world; an' so— Ef thar' was ary way we mought make a big 'nough stake to jump this cussed kentry— You don't see no sech show, do you, ma'am?"

Iva caught her breath quickly. Surely this was a chance? And yet— How could she trust such evil-looking and evil-acting knaves?

"Fer one thing, ma'am, ef you hed any good fri'nds who'd see that we wasn't left out losers in this yer' game, why— Not sayin' fer dead sure we'd set ye free, but— Eh?"

"Oh, sir, you shall be paid—richly paid for rescuing me! If you only will! If you will only take me across to Smack-over, or— If you could but let Mr. Houghton know where I was!"

The rascal gave a wry grimace at mention of the giant sport, but he was well content with the result of his venture as far as it had gone.

He knew now that their fair charge was willing to bargain with them for her freedom, and it only remained to decide just how hard they ought to strike this new bonanza.

"Wal, ma'am," he said, with a thoughtful drawl, "thar's a turrible heap o' resk to run, fer the boss— That's Cap'n Clutch, ye know? The boss is bad medicine when anything or anybody crosses him. An' so— Reckon I'll hev' to talk it over 'long of my pard yender, ma'am."

"Do so, sir, but— I'll pay you any sum in reason if you will act like gentlemen! Let me go, or take me to town—"

"Wal, ma'am, that's what we'll talk over, ef it's all the same to you," cut in

the knave, backing away in fairly good order.

Like one who hardly held full faith in the truth or integrity of his pard, the second knave had slouched up near enough to make fairly certain Mack was not trying to drive a bargain solely on his own account, but he had not been near enough to catch every word uttered.

So it was that, when once again back at their former station, the pair of rascals went over the whole interview, Mack dealing on the dead level as far as that was concerned.

"You see, pardy, it's jest as easy as rollin' off a greasy log!" he declared, enthusiastically. "I jest knowed how the 'ole thing was gwine to work from the jump-off! An' you— Wal, ef you hedn't no better head than that same ole cabeza of yours to 'pend on, Top, you'd never git rich 'nough to starve to death!"

"That's all right ef ye only think that way, Mack; but sayin' ain't doin', nur axin' ain't gittin', nuther! Now— What sized pile do you raaly reckon ye kin make out of this yer' job?"

"Wal, pardy, that's jest what I'm wantin' of ye to help settle on," came the frank response. "Ef we knowed jest how much the gal could raise by her lonesome, an' how much she could shore count on gittin' out of her fri'nds an' 'lations, why the way would be dead easy!"

"You'd strike her fer the pile, then, Mack?"

"An' more, too, ef I could git it," came the deliciously candid reply.

"A couple o' hunderd, Mack?"

"Oh, git out! Couple o' nothin'! I'm climbin' 'way up in the thousands, or I don't play!" decisively cried the wider-minded knave, throwing out one hand in a brisk flourish.

"Holy smoke!"

"That's what's the matter, Top, an' mighty well wu'th it all, too! Fer why? Say we jest keep on like stoughton bottles es we've bi'n doin' this too mighty long! Say we let the boss hev' his own way with the gal; what sort o' show will she run?"

"Mighty slim—turrible slim, an' that's a fact, Mack!"

"You bet your sweet life, Top! An' so— Nothin' less than clean thousands can open this yer' jack-pot. An' when we git the solid chucks, pards, we'll jest— Eh?"

"Vide up the spon's an' rack out fer fresh pastures, o' course!"

"I say, pard! Don't you reckon—"

"It'd be a case o' skip or ketch heap sight wuss, Mack! The boss'd raise the deuce ef we was to play him dirt, this-a-way!"

"Blame the boss! What I'm thinkin' 'bout is this yer' 'vidin' up part of it! Didn't I do the plannin'? Didn't you say 'twas no good ontel I showed ye how easy the trick mought be turned?"

"What's that?" "th the divvy?" surlily demanded the other knave, scowling to match that black frown, drawing back a little and one hand instinctively fumbling at a pistol butt.

"Heap sight, I reckon! Didn't I hatch 'er all up?"

"An' won't I be runnin' jest es much resk es you, eh? An' that's why I say even-stepen, or deuce a bit of a pile to 'vide up!"

Matters began to assume a stormy aspect now, and as the two knaves squatted there, scowling at each other, a fresh hope found birth in Iva's heart.

If they were to really quarrel over the prospective spoils, would not the benefit belong to her? Couldn't she run away while—

Eager in that new-born hope, the maiden ventured to test her bonds, for while they remained in place she was helpless.

But the ending was not to come after that fashion, although the two road-agents were rapidly verging toward a deadly collision: for while they disputed viciously, an unsuspected enemy crept near enough to catch the drop, and then rang forth the stern challenge:

"Hands up, both! Try to kick, and we'll blow ye through!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A SURPRISE FOR HUGH KELLAR.

With that order and threat a brace of honest-looking fellows stepped from cover, each holding the drop on his man, looking ready to shoot at the first symptom of resistance.

"Play lamb, fellows, or you'll catch it right where you live," warned one of the couple. "Up with your paws, and stand as though you were posed for a photograph, both!"

Taken completely off their guard, the pair of ruffians glared at these new-comers in wild-eyed dismay, but they saw "shoot" in those eyes, and up went their hands, Mack mumbling:

"Don't shoot, gents! We hain't— We're jest honest men out on a prospect, which—"

"You both look that way, I don't think!" retorted the taller of the strangers, his mustache curling in a cynical smile. "Now, Alf, you pull their teeth while I keep 'em covered, please."

"You bet I will! And I'll jerk their heads off, too, if they try to nip my fingers while I'm pulling snags."

While one of the strangers held them covered, his mate passed around to their rear, disarming them both, simply inserting the point of a keen blade between body and belt, then slitting the stout leather through, permitting weapons and all to drop to earth.

With a deft foot he drew these away far enough to run no risk while stooping for them; then he stood ready for the next move.

"You look mighty tired, fellows," again spoke up the other stranger. "Suppose you lie down and rest a little? No argument; lie down, or I'll lay you down—hard!"

Thoroughly cowed, the two knaves obeyed, falling flat on their faces as commanded, after which it was a comparatively brief and easy task to bind them.

Not until this was fairly accomplished would the strangers listen to any plea or excuse coming from those lips.

And now, when Mack essayed to lie out of the ugly box their covetousness was mainly instrumental in getting them into, he was bluntly silenced by threats of a gag in case he tried to speak before spoken to.

"We'll hear you later on, perhaps, but for now— Clap a stopper on, or we'll do it for you!"

Having fairly secured their human game, the strangers turned attention toward the fairer captive, who was thrilling with joy as she saw and heard it all.

Now, as heretofore, the taller of the twain acted as main spokesman, introducing himself and pard as a couple of stray prospectors whom fortune guided that way just when they could do the most good.

His friend was Alfred Maywood, his own name was Horace Richards.

"We were out in these hills, hoping to strike it rich, just as so many other fellows have before us, Miss Church," the tall man added, in easy explanation. "We caught sight of the smoke rising from your camp-fire, and thought 'twould do no harm to take a bit of a stroll over this way to see what our neighbors looked like."

"Oh, sir, how thankful I am for your coming!" brokenly murmured the maiden, pale from strong excitement.

"As we are thankful for the chance to serve you, Miss Church," the tall prospector quickly supplemented. "Now, may we ask just what manner of service we can render next?"

"I was going to the town called Smackover, sir, when the stage was attacked by road-agents, and—"

"Captain Clutch and his Crooks, for ducats!" asserted Maywood, with increased interest in his face as he looked toward their prisoners. "And of course these pretty fellows were part of that notorious gang?"

"That's a blamed lie, we never wasn't, nuther!" fairly exploded Mack, his hearing sharpened by the peril which surely menaced them now.

"I'll look after the fellows, Race; you can talk it all over with the young lady,"

and Maywood moved across to where the pair of rogues lay in bonds.

Richards seemed more than willing to accept this division of duty, and quickly had Iva telling her story, to which he listened with no small degree of interest.

Of course she did not tell him all; while appearing perfect gentlemen in spite of their rough garb, she could hardly be expected to place such implicit confidence in them, as yet.

But she told how the Smackover stage had been held up by road-agents, who shot down all save herself, then bore her away through the night, plunging deeper into the hills, where she was finally placed in the care of Mack and Top, two of the gang, for the time being.

"You can witness to their being members of the road-agent gang, of course, Miss Church?"

"I can, most decidedly, sir! I can take my oath before the law that they were with the gang when I was carried away captive, and that they have repeatedly since then spoken of Captain Clutch as being their boss and master," firmly replied the maiden.

Then, having regained her confidence in goodly measure, the girl asked Richards how far they now were from Smackover.

"I ought to have been there long before this, sir," she added, her voice trembling with suppressed emotions. "If you could only show me the way, if you can't act as my escort, why—"

"It is a long and rough road for a lady like you, Miss Church."

"I am strong—far stronger than I look, Mr. Richards," Iva protested, earnestly. "And if you would only guide or direct me to the road over which the stage runs—"

"We'll try to serve you better than that, Miss Church," said Horace, with a faint smile. "We are afoot, but I see those fellows had horses, and they form part of the spoils of war, of course!"

"You will take me to Smackover, sir? Oh, if you could guess how much may depend upon—"

She checked herself, fearful of saying too much, and, rightly guessing that a secret lay hidden there, Horace Richards generously turned away from it, giving as an excuse a wish to question the prisoners a bit.

He found them willing enough to use their tongues, though hardly after the fashion he could ask, the rascals vigorously swearing they had done no harm in life, but were terribly abused just now.

When charged with being members of the road-agent gang, both Mack and Top almost choked themselves in denying everything.

"You only make a bad matter worse, fellows," announced Horace Richards, when he saw that nothing was to be gleaned from them. "The lady you were left here to guard by Captain Clutch has told us all, and her evidence will be more than sufficient to fit a snug noose about each one of your necks."

"She lies if she says—"

"Careful, there!"

"Wal, sir, it's a blamed shame of a pore critter cain't talk up fer his own self when it comes to slingin' ropes an' hangin', an' all such like, right into the face of him!" surlily grumbled Mack.

"Talk all you like, Johnny, but talk a chalk-line."

"Which is jest what I'm doin', boss, an' so— The gal's plum' crazy! Pard an' me was jest takin' her 'crost to send down to the highest 'sylum, fer— Hope may die ef 'tain't the solid truth, boss!"

Both Richards and Maywood broke into hearty laughter at this ridiculous defense, while even Iva joined in with a faint smile.

But now he had marked out his line of defense, Mack was not to be shaken in the slightest, swearing that Iva was a lunatic, sister to his second wife, and with such a dangerous mania that they felt forced to place her under restraint.

In vain were keen questions poured in upon them, relating to Captain Clutch and his force; both scoundrels stuck doggedly to that line, and would not be driven nor coaxed away from it even for an instant.

Seeing at length that they were only wasting time, the two pards yielded to Iva's evident impatience to get under way, and placing her upon one of the captured horses, mounting the two prisoners upon its mate, tying them securely in place, the march was begun toward Smackover.

While deeply grieved by what she believed was the killing of honest Uncle 'Lias, Iva could not but feel elated over her fortunate escape from the outlaw gang, one member of whom she knew she had especial cause for fearing.

His name was upon her lips more than once during that journey, as she chatted with the tall and handsome prospector who walked by her horse, leaving Maywood to guard the sullen prisoners.

That she did not pronounce the name was hardly because she could not place full faith in the honesty of this man, so recently a complete stranger, but to speak of him would naturally lead on to questions which she dared not invite.

So long as poor Rodney was a fugitive from the law—even such law as was represented by the Vigilantes of Peculiar—she dared not speak too openly of him, of the New Find, or of the enemy who was masquerading as Captain Clutch.

That rescue and capture combined took place remote from the stage road running between Peculiar and Smackover, so the little party were forced to pick their way "across lots" as best they might, for a goodly portion of the time forced to walk, since trotting was out of the question, even had all been mounted.

Fortune had another glad surprise in store for Iva that day, and it yet lacked a little of the noon hour when, almost without sound or warning, they came squarely upon an armed force of men, both mounted and afoot.

At first this meeting caused some alarm on their side, but a clear, exultant shout went up as a giant figure dashed that way, and with a low, glad cry Iva Church recognized Carlos Houghton.

It was, indeed, the party of rescuers from Peculiar, and Iva was soon the center of a joyous group, but ere she could even begin her story, or introduce her new friends, she caught sight of Hugh Kellar just coming into full view from toward the roaring river across yonder.

"Stop him!" she cried, sharply. "He is Captain Clutch! And he murdered poor Uncle 'Lias! I saw him do the foul deed!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE GAMBLER'S LAST STAKE.

As fortune would have it, Hugh Kellar was out of sight and sound when the meeting took place, so his surprise was complete in that it came upon him without the slightest warning.

He glared at the accusing maiden like one unable to trust the evidence of his own senses; then, as a fierce shout of angry triumph burst from the lips of the giant spotter sport, he likewise sprang into action.

The gambler saw the two road-agents in bonds, and that alone would have been quite sufficient to show him how poor a chance he would stand of clearing himself through denial alone.

"She lies!" he shouted, savagely, whipping forth a revolver. "It's all an infernal lie, and— Chew lead, curse ye all!"

He opened fire at once, mainly at the giant spotter and Iva Church, as though recognizing his greatest danger lay right there.

He began retreating at the same time, knowing that all was lost unless he could effect his escape before the Vigilantes fairly grasped the situation.

Heedless of himself for the time being, Carlos Houghton rushed in front of the imperiled maiden, shoving both Iva and her horse back with kindly force, covering her with his own massive figure as he cried out at the top of his mighty voice:

"Take him, men! Take him alive! Don't shoot, but— I'll eat up the hot-head who dares even think of killing the hang-dog scoundrel!"

Two or three shots were fired by the desperate gambler before the crowd could exactly realize what was happening; but his

very thirst for revenge helped to foil that fierce desire, and neither Iva nor Carlos went down before his aim ere he was forced to flee in order to save himself.

And yet, whither could he flee?

At his rear ran the river, roaring sullenly in its bed more than a score feet below that level, the banks rising almost perpendicularly from the water's edge.

Afoot, with more than two score horsemen ready to swoop down upon him, no matter how fleet of foot he might prove himself.

Showing his teeth in a vicious grin, now using a gun with each hand, though more by way of holding off a charge than aught else, since he had briefly lost sight of his especial enemies, Hugh Kellar retreated with face to the foe, pausing only when instinct warned him another step rearward would send him over the precipitous bank to meet his fate below.

"Back, ye hounds!" he shouted, never in life looking more grandly desperate than right then and there. "It's all an infernal lie to save Rod Church, but— Let Carlos Houghton come and take me, if he can!"

An answering roar came from the giant sport, but he was now penned in by numbers, thanks to the efforts he had been making to save Iva Church from injury, and before he could fairly extricate himself some of the rescuing party opened fire upon the gambler at bay.

A couple of shots from his guns, then Hugh Kellar gave a yell of fierce defiance as he turned swiftly and leaped far out over that dizzy bank!

Just at that instant Carlos Houghton fairly split the crowd as he made his rush, Chief snorting wildly as he obeyed the touch of those armed heels, and headed directly for yonder desperate criminal.

A momentary recoil as he saw Hugh Kellar leap from the bank, then the Man of Muscle shouted out sharply:

"Guard Miss Church, Ironwood! I'll take him alive, or—"

If he finished that sentence it was lost to the ears of the Vigilante chief, for the reckless rider plunged right on, sending Chief in a mighty leap over the bank precisely where Hugh Kellar had stood but a half-score seconds earlier!

A recoil, a gasp of horror, then a roar of inarticulate sounds burst from the lungs of the rescuing party, and they surged forward in a confused mass, eager to see as well as to assist, if that might be.

There was naught of order or system in that rush, for even the best trained among them all had been taken by surprise.

It was desperate enough in the case of Hugh Kellar, and he was taking the single chance out of a score; but the risk was surely doubled when a horseman took that leap.

Shouting, cursing, only alike in their amazement, the crowd flocked to the bank, peering over to see—what?

"Yonder he goes, by glory!"

"Alive—swimming, too!"

"Whooray fer the sport!"

"But, whar's Kellar?"

The air was fairly filled with these and kindred cries, for there, seemingly just risen to the surface, but strongly fighting the swift current as it rushed between its rocky banks, the Man of Muscle and his gallant steed were seen—only that!

Nothing could be seen of the gambler, and but a brief glimpse was caught of his pursuer as the hurrying waters swept Houghton downward and around that abrupt bend in the rocky channel.

"He's slippin' off, fer to— Good-by, sport!" yelled an over-excited citizen as he caught a parting glimpse of the giant spotter.

Was it accident or intentional?

Be that as it may, he could take oath that he saw Carlos Houghton leaving the saddle as his good horse struggled desperately with the swift and eddying current!

"Down the sho' fer to help— The deuce!"

The enthusiastic fellow cut himself short as he realized the truth which he had temporarily forgotten.

Just there the river found a way through a rocky ridge, and nothing less active than

a mountain goat could have followed the curve closely enough to keep an eye on what might be taking place there in that contracted channel.

John Ironwood was one of the earliest to fully realize all this, and it was his stern tones which now made themselves heard above all that confusion.

"Stiddy, men! Git ready fer a dash down yen' way, all ye who kin take horses! Lively, now, fer they may need help by the time they git clean through the Gut!"

All this covered but a few seconds, but during it the maiden suffered tortures past the power of pen to adequately portray.

She knew Carlos was saving her life at the risk of his own when the exposed gambler was firing their way.

She saw him burst through the confused crowd, recklessly charging upon their desperate enemy, who— Heavens!

She bowed her head and covered her eyes as she saw the Man of Muscle take that desperate leap, with the sound of her name still ringing from his lips.

Then, all those shouts and cries and wild surmises!

Half-stunned, hardly knowing what disposition was being made of herself, Iva was placed under care of trusty hands, then John Ironwood rode off at plunging speed at the head of his picked men, eager to circle that obstacle and gain the river beyond in time to intercept the desperate rivals when they should be current-swept out of the Gut!

There was time enough, it seemed, yet none to waste, in picking their way on that rough ride, and without the loss of a moment beyond what was absolutely necessary, the detour was made, the river reached, all eyes eagerly strained to catch the earliest possible glimpse of—what?

"Ef ary one comes down thar' alive, 'twill be a meracle!" blantly declared one grizzled veteran. "Mebbe thar'll be 'nough left fer to make a decent plantin', but ary mo' then that—nary!"

But he was a confirmed croaker, and no attention was paid to his gloomy predictions. "And yet—was he so very far wrong?"

Surely it was time for something to be heard or seen? Surely one or both of the men ought to be here by this time?

Yet naught could be seen of dead or living, human or beast!

They could see the river where it first emerged from the Gut, nearly a couple of hundred yards above their present position.

They could command every foot of the stream from shore to shore, and not an object as big as an apple could pass them by unseen, yet never a glimpse of what they so eagerly sought!

And, with hope growing faint and fainter each passing minute, John Ironwood and his men waited there for the coming of the remainder of the party, among whom were Iva Church, her newly-found friends, the two prospectors, and the bound road-agents as well.

Poor Iva was eagerly looking for that giant shape, but her heart sank low as she failed to recognize it among the rest, and as she saw old John Ironwood shake his head in answering those eager questions, she closed her eyes and shivered, sick at heart.

Never until this moment had she fairly realized what meant the powerful interest this dauntless true-heart had inspired her with; but now—as she heard some person declare that both men had surely perished there in the Gut, she knew that love had taken her heart captive.

For nearly another hour the waters were watched in the vague hope that the bodies might even yet come drifting down with the current, but at the end of that interval all hope was abandoned, and John Ironwood gave the word to start for Peculiar.

By this time Iva had in a measure rallied from that awful shock, and murmured something about wishing to go to Smackover instead.

"That's all right, ma'am, an' I'll see that you gits your wishes," promptly answered the chief of Vigilantes. "But Peculiar is heap sight the nearest now, an' you don't

look fit fer ary longer ja'nt. So, Peculiar fu'st; then I'll 'scort ye to Smackover es soon es ye kin ax it."

Iva made no further objection, for now that Carlos was dead, she seemed to have lost all interest in life, for the present, at least.

Leaving the river behind them, the party took up the most direct route practicable for Peculiar, reaching the town in the dusk of evening, to find Uncle 'Lias not only alive, but in a fair way for recovery!

And when he heard what had happened he swore most roundly, adding:

"Cuss him to etarnity! Hugh Kellar was Cap'n Clutch, all the time!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE MAN OF MUSCLE'S TRIUMPH.

Carlos Houghton had but one thought in life when he sent spurs into the flanks of his good steed and forced him to take that leap from the precipitous bank into the yeasty waters a score feet below.

For many long months he had been patiently tracking this criminal down, picking up a clew here, a hint there, a bit of proof yonder, joining all together in a cunning mosaic, with a gallows for the centerpiece.

And now, just as he was ready to close his grip upon his prey, to see it swept away by a death such as only a brave and honest man deserved!

Never!

Sending back that one shout which proved the strength of the love which he had never dared to put into words, the Man of Muscle leaped over that bank and shot dizzily downward, to plunge into those cold waters with a force which carried both horse and rider far below the surface.

Fortunately the water was deep at this point, for Houghton felt Chief strike bottom as it was; then they rose swiftly to the surface, as yet wholly free from injury.

Shaking his head to clear his sight of water, Houghton flashed an eager look around in quest of his human prey, but for the first few seconds he failed to distinguish aught amidst that foaming, swirling, bubbling flood.

Each second was sweeping horse and rider further down the stream, carrying them nearer the further bank as the curve grew sharper, and as he swept another eager look around, Carlos caught a passing glimpse of those now flocking to the bank above.

Then, just as he was beginning to fear that death had cheated him of his just vengeance, the giant spotter caught sight of a human head breaking the surface only a few yards further down the stream, and with a roar of savage exultation he recognized the face of Hugh Kellar, the Peculiar sport.

Then it was that he left the saddle, voluntarily, not through weakness of horse or rider, as they surmised above.

The roaring of the pent-up stream drowned that shout, but the gambler saw what was coming, and made his preparations accordingly.

Through that desperate leap, the plunge, the fight against the hidden eddies and "sucks" which strove to hold him under, Hugh Kellar had clung to one of his revolvers, and now, while both were being swept past that curve and down stream with dizzying rapidity, he used one hand to raise himself above the water sufficiently far to level the gun at his oncoming enemy, giving a vicious snarl of mingled rage and triumph as he pulled trigger.

The metallic cartridges were proof against water, and this one did not fail to respond promptly to the fall of the pointed hammer, but nevertheless the lead missed its mark, thanks to the current and to the swift dive which Houghton made as he saw that weapon come to a level.

His head broke water fairly within arm's length of the gambler, although Kellar strove to swim away at a sharp angle, and then, dropping his gun as worse than useless in an aquatic combat, the criminal jerked his knife from its scabbard, crying out viciously as he tried to stab the giant.

A swift hand caught his wrist as the

weapon lunged forward, and though the grasp was but an imperfect one, 'twas sufficient to save the Man of Muscle from a death or disabling wound.

A brief wrestle thus, then the gambler wrenched his wrist free, but 'twas done at the cost of his knife, that weapon flying far out of his reach, briefly glimmering in the sunlight before it sank forever under that disturbed surface.

Then Houghton worked to a close, his arms gripping the gambler with paralyzing force, drawing him under water as the rivals fought as only such men know how—fought for life or death!

There could be but one termination, although few other men in that region could have won a victory over the desperate gambler; but Carlos Houghton was a marvel, and Hugh Kellar found himself little more than a child in that mighty grasp.

Rising to the surface with his prey, the Man of Muscle shook himself clear of those partially benumbed hands, then gripped Kellar by the back of his neck, holding him struggling and gasping at arm's length.

Dashing the streaming water from his eyes with the other hand, Houghton looked around for Chief, giving a call as he did so.

The response came instantly in the shape of a glad neigh, and as the noble brute came swimming gallantly that way, the Man of Muscle prepared for the end.

He had his prey comparatively helpless, but the next thing was to both hold and save it—for the gallows!

"Steady, Chief!"

Houghton made no attempt to mount, or to lift the nearly strangled gambler across the saddle; that would be both reckless and wellnigh hopeless under the present circumstances.

Instead, he jerked the trail rope free from the pommel, where it was hanging, leaving one end secure.

Deftly paying the lariat out for a few yards, Houghton urged Chief to greater efforts, for now two human lives hung upon his powers.

Alone, the Man of Muscle might have saved himself by strong swimming through the perilous Gut; but he would not abandon Kellar, and that heavy burden would have surely sunk him without assistance from Chief.

Taking a couple of turns with the lariat around Kellar's body, then grasping the rope with his free hand, Houghton bore the criminal partly on his right arm, partly on his shoulder, cheering the good horse on, kept above the surface by that gentle yet fairly steady strain.

With voice and rope Carlos was able to guide the horse to his own will, and as he caught sight of the lower end of that narrow channel, he veered to the right, or opposite shore to that where he had left John Ironwood and his Vigilance Committee.

Just at the end of the Gut was a narrow ledge of rock at the water's level, leading back in a gentle slope to a cluster of rocks and scrubby growth of trees and bushes.

With a desperate scramble the brute managed to land upon the shelf of rock, after which the rest was easy enough for the giant spotter sport.

Tossing the now insensible gambler out of the water, Houghton followed after, and not wasting a moment in rest lest he be discovered by the Vigilantes, who might try to claim his prey by virtue of the charge so publicly made by Iva Church, Carlos picked up his game and hurried up that slope to the thick-lying cover beyond.

And none too soon either!

Scarcely had that cover been won, and Chief placed back of a boulder amply large enough to cover his bulk, than Houghton saw John Ironwood, at the head of his men, racing down to the edge of the river only a few rods below his covert.

Lying where he could see without being seen, Houghton watched the men below, grimly chuckling to himself as he divined what their thoughts must be when moments crept to minutes without bringing aught to their eager eyes.

"You mean mighty well, gentlemen, but I'm better satisfied as matters now stand," he muttered softly to himself. "You shall

have the neck-tie party I promised you easy enough, but only when I am ready."

When Hugh Kellar showed signs of recovery Houghton drew a bit further back, keeping in readiness to smother any attempt at outcry, holding in waiting a gag which he prepared for use as soon as his prisoner was sufficiently restored to make its application safe.

And then, with his arms bound at the wrists and elbows behind his back, and a snugly-fitting gag between his jaws, Hugh Kellar could only look his hatred, his curses, his threats of vengeance.

"Oh, I know you're like a blind rattler in August, pardner," coolly said the Man of Muscle, plainly enjoying that impotent fury while waiting for yonder party to take their departure. "But I've drawn your fangs, and when you've fairly cast your slough— Well, your new skin will look all the more dazzling in the lights of Satan's dominions!"

As already shown, the rescuing party waited far longer than was strictly necessary on the opposite bank, hoping against reason, but Carlos had one consolation while waiting there under cover—he could watch Iva Church, and from her dejected attitude could draw glad inspiration.

For—why was she sorrowing, now that freedom was hers once more?

The Man of Muscle felt that it was over his loss, and his eyes glowed, his blood leaped, his heart thrilled with glad triumph, as he looked forward to the days yet to come.

At length the party moved away and left the giant sport free to quit his covert with the bound road-agent.

Fastening Kellar in the saddle, Houghton walked alongside, for the nature of the ground forbade any more rapid progress, even if the Man of Muscle could have brought himself to doubly burden Chief after that gallant struggle with the swirling waters.

Still fairly rapid progress was made, and the afternoon was hardly more than half spent when Houghton checked Chief only a short distance from the secret refuge where he had left Rodney Church in hiding.

Giving the agreed-upon signal, a prompt response came to his ears. Then blindfolding his prisoner, Houghton entered the cavern, to be gladly greeted by his young protegee.

"Never mind him," Carlos said, with a grim chuckle, as Rodney seemed taken aback by the presence of another, even though that other was a prisoner. "He'll never tell what he sees or hears, unless it be to ornament a dying speech on the gallows!"

Taking Kellar from the horse, binding him again with extra care, the Man of Muscle made partial explanation, paying no heed to the vicious looks and squirmings of the accused.

"Now, lad, matters are going on famously, and I'll have you out of this in a day or two at the very outside," declared Houghton, anticipating those anxious questions.

"All is well with your sister, too, and the hardest work you've got to do is to wait here, and to guard well this precious treasure!"

Without revealing everything, Houghton made Rodney understand how much might depend upon keeping Kellar safe bound, then took his departure, heading as directly as possible for Peculiar, to close up his daring game.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MAN OF MUSCLE DRAWS HIS NET.

"Wal, ef I ever, no I never!"

"Shake, John, and see if there's anything very spookish about that, will you?" laughingly saluted the giant sport, extending a hand which looked and felt very live indeed.

But the chief of Vigilantes could hardly withdraw his gaze, so firmly was he convinced that Carlos Houghton had met death yonder in the roaring waters of the Gut, in company with Hugh Kellar.

Instead, here was the Man of Muscle,

"big as life and twice as natural," modestly rapping at the door of the head of the Law and Order League just as John was fairly settled down in company with his wife for an after-supper smoke and chat over recent events.

Then, if living, where was Hugh Kellar?

Bluntly enough came this query, but instead of giving a direct answer, Houghton sent in another question.

"Will you help me turn up the actual killer of Tom Hooper, Mr. Ironwood? Of course I might do it by my lonesome, but with you along as witness, and in a manner to back up my word— Understand?"

"You've found him out, then?"

"Come with me and see for yourself, sir."

That was enough. Such a call to duty could never be shirked by an honest man, and the chief of Vigilantes lost precious little time in getting ready for the trip, let that lead whither and last as long as it might.

That trip proved to be a remarkably short one, and John Ironwood gave a low grunt of amazement when the spotter sport halted in front of the building where Jerry Mixture had found refuge after his terribly shattered knee laid him up a cripple for life.

"Shorely you don't mean that he done it, Houghton?"

"I surely mean that he can explain just how poor Hooper met his death," answered the Man of Muscle, in similar guarded tones.

"Then 'twasn't Rod Church?"

"No. I believe I hinted as much, some little time ago," returned the big fellow, complacently. "When you had that rope so snugly fitted about his neck, for instance!"

John Ironwood flinched, but Houghton felt little compunction on that score. Surely he merited some slight punishment.

Letting that point drop for the moment, Carlos added:

"The doctor says that the amputation was a success, and that Jerry will undoubtedly recover, in good time; but the rascal doesn't know all that, as yet, for good and sufficient reasons.

"Now, we're going in to draw the whole truth out of the fellow, and I don't want you to cross me in anything I may say or promise. I mean it all for the best, so— Agreed?"

"An' Church never done it? An' we wanted to hang him?" muttered the Vigilante leader, seemingly dazed by that totally unexpected blow.

"You shall see and hear it all for yourself, Mr. Ironwood," added Houghton, moving forward and giving a peculiar rap at the closed door. "For now, play your meant to back up my words with your whole force if Jerry should turn stubborn, please!"

The door was opened by the doctor who had taken charge of the case, and recognizing the callers, stepped aside to grant them admission, at the same time whispering to the sport:

"He's ripe for making a clean breast of it, sir, and I hardly think you will have to do more than mild threatening. I've been working him up for the ordeal, you see, sir."

"I'll see that you don't lose your time, anyway, doctor," quietly assured the spotter sport, then passing on into the dimly lighted room where the crippled gambler lay upon a bed.

Instead of threats or menaces, Houghton quickly saw that gentleness would serve better; and, taking a seat beside the bed, he laid a cool, firm hand over that fevered brow, as he spoke in grave and earnest tones:

"The time has come, Jerry, when you've got to tell the whole truth about that Tom Hooper scrape. If you speak the whole truth, you shall not only escape serious punishment, but will be looked after until you can once again make your own living."

"I won't— No hanging, sir?" huskily faltered the cripple, shrinking from sight of gaunt John Ironwood.

"Not for yourself, Jerry, whatever may come to others. And they— Well, we can get along without your evidence, of course, which would leave you to take your long chances with the gang. Now, choose, Mixture."

The frightened wretch shrank away, too greatly agitated for plain speech, but enough was caught to serve as a promise, and motioning to the doctor, Houghton said:

"To guard against accidents— In case Mixture shouldn't rally, that is— Best take down his evidence in writing. You will serve, doctor, please?"

"With all the pleasure in life, Mr. Houghton!"

"But I ain't—going to—croak!" huskily panted the knave, shivering and wide-eyed at that grimly significant hint.

"Not if skill and care can save you, provided you make a full and free confession, Jerry," avowed the Man of Muscle. "And now, who stabbed Tom Hooper?"

"Dick Whiffler done it— Hope I may die, sir, if that's a lie! Dick stabbed him as he lay sleeping, after driving the kid out to the slope. Just sneaked in and stabbed Tom with the boy's own knife, sir."

Like one wishing to free his mind of a heavy load, Jerry Mixture rattled this off, almost in a single breath, then lay back exhausted.

The sport gave him a sup of whisky, and little by little the whole black plot was laid bare, Mixture raising no further difficulties about telling all he knew, and only spurred on now and then by an adroit question calculated to throw still further light upon some important point.

Jerry swore that Hugh Kellar was at the bottom of the whole business, hoping to gain full possession of the New Find if he could fairly dispose of the partners without too deeply incriminating himself.

He hired Whiffler and Jerry to dispose of Tom Hooper, leaving town ostensibly on a business trip to Smackover so that no question could arise as to his complicity when the bold play was made for the mine.

First getting Hooper drunk, the rest came easily enough, and even better than planned, since Rodney Church played right into their hand by mixing in a public row with his partner, and menacing his life with the knife which, later on, actually did the bloody deed.

The two were dogging Hooper after leaving the Alhambra, and saw him drive Rodney out of the shanty; saw him with the knife, and, later on, they stole up to end the play.

They fired the shanty after the killing was done by Dick Whiffler, alarming the town in time to rescue the corpse that it might tell its false tale against poor Rodney.

All this was read over to the crippled witness, then sworn to and signed by the fellow, attested to by John Ironwood and the doctor.

Marvelously meek the Vigilante chief looked and acted now, and even the Man of Muscle felt halfway sorry for the honest old fellow.

"'Twas a mistake any other man might have made, pardner," he assured, by way of consolation; but the veteran shook his head dubiously.

"It's a mistake I'll never make ag'in, after this yer' case is worked off the hooks. Fer why, I'll never play Vigilante no mo'!" was what he said.

Leaving Jerry Mixture to the doctor's care, with instructions to deny admittance to all who might call unless they could show a written permit from either himself or John Ironwood, Houghton left the place and at once conducted the Vigilante to another building, where he entered without the ceremony of knocking or asking permission.

Here several men were engaged playing poker, but the game broke up for good and all at that unceremonious entrance.

"Go easy, the pile o' ye!" sternly commanded the Man of Muscle, guns out and catching the drop. "Hold 'em level,

Ironwood, and shoot the first man who tries to skip— Save my meat!"

With alacrity the Vigilante chief covered the men, and slipping his own guns back out of the way, Houghton strode forward, sternly crying:

"I want you, Dick Whiffler! You murdered Whooping Tom and— No, ye don't, now, you infernal whelp!"

As the desperado attempted a break for liberty, the Man of Muscle leaped upon him, crushing him to the floor and never giving over until he had him helpless in bonds.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE NECK-TIE PARTY AT PECULIAR.

There was a vast deal going on in Peculiar that night which the citizens in general failed to "catch on to," but early the next day an eager stir and bustle were perceptible.

Men gathered in little knots to ask questions, but few seemed able to return satisfactory answers, although each one essayed to do so, giving his fancy for possible facts.

On but a single point could the majority agree, and that was: something out of the ordinary run was about to happen, and due notice was to be given by John Ironwood blowing the bugle-call, which was used to gather the Vigilantes when haste was essential.

Then—the call sounded.

And a few minutes later the tall, magnificent form of Carlos Houghton, the Man of Muscle, appeared upon the front porch of the hotel, in front of which an eager crowd had gathered, smiling grimly as he doffed his hat and leisurely glanced over that little sea of faces.

A brief silence; then a voice made itself heard:

"Speech! Houghton! Speech!"

That call was quickly taken up until those voices united in a great roar, which was stilled only when the Man of Muscle lifted a hand to command attention.

"Men of Peculiar, if not peculiar men!" was his beginning, greeted, of course, by a roar of laughter. "I gave a solemn pledge the other day, and now I am here to make that promise good!"

"I said that Rodney Church was wholly guiltless of murdering his pard, Whooping Tom, and I am here to prove his innocence."

"I vowed that I would run the real criminal down, and I have done just that!"

A wild, fierce yell broke in at this point, but John Ironwood and a number of his best men stepped forth from the hotel. Winchester in hand, and clearly determined to do their sworn duty, regardless of friend or foe.

Houghton held up a hand, and again silence was restored.

"Some of you gentlemen both called and thought me a braggart and fool for making such a pledge, but I meant every word I said, as you can right soon see for yourselves."

"I swore to provide you fit material for a neck-tie party, since nothing less would satisfy you, and now—right here you have it!"

A swift gesture, and other shapes showed in yonder doorway, some acting as guards, others bound and helpless, yet glaring their savage rage and defiance.

Among the prisoners was Hugh Kellar, bruised and battered after his experience coming through the Gut, but defiant in the face of all.

Near him stood Eli Jacks, pale and trembling in spite of his desperate attempt to hold a bold front in this, his hour of bitter defeat.

Hard by, Dick Whiffler was supported by an armed guard, by far the most unnerved of the more prominent prisoners.

There were other captives, among them the two ruffians surprised by the prospectors when Iva Church was rescued.

Great was the surprise among the gathered citizens when those prisoners were fully recognized, and many were fairly stunned by the shock.

Taking instant advantage of that brief-lived stupor, Carlos Houghton resumed

his talk, pointing out both Kellar and Jacks as having in rotation played the part of Captain Clutch, thus removing even the faintest risk of suspicion pointing their way, by providing alibis which could by no means be shaken until the whole truth should become known, as now.

He told how the two arch-knaves had schemed to win the New Find by doing murder, or worse; told how Eli Jacks played Captain Clutch on that occasion, making a vicious demand for Hugh Kellar as a blind; how that daring escape by the gambler was nothing more than a cunning trick, the main object being to capture and secrete Iva Church and so remove another obstacle to their winning the New Find.

He told of the murder, the confession by Jerry Mixture, which could be sworn to by John Ironwood and the doctor; and then, at another signal from his willing arm, two other faces appeared at an upper window—the faces of Rodney Church and his charming sister.

Carlos Houghton was about calling for a cheer, but his voice was completely drowned by the sudden voluntary outburst that ensued—and only for the ready action taken by the armed Vigilantes the hotel would surely have been stormed then and there.

When order was once more restored, the spotter sport briefly added:

"I staked my own neck on giving you a grand neck-tie party, men of Peculiar. Now, here is your material, choicest of the select! I wash my hands of the matter, now and forever!"

"Here are your men; use them as seems best to you. Hug or hang, pity or punish, kiss or kill— 'Tis all the same to me!"

Chief Ironwood and his armed guard took full possession of the prisoners, putting them in the center of a hollow square, then marching away from the hotel to another building better calculated for keeping such desperate villains in safe custody.

Peculiar seemed bound to have her famous neck-tie party in spite of all precautions, for, between midnight and dawn the temporary jail was forced, in spite of the armed guards, and the entire company of criminals were hurried across to the death-tree. And there—

Well, certain it is that no Man of Muscle came to the rescue, offering his own neck as bail for theirs, and when the sun showed its face the next morning, it looked down upon certain grim and ghastly shapes stretched out on the ground beneath that tree.

With that awful denouement disappeared Captain Clutch and his Crooks.

All that now remains is to pick up the few scattered threads and knot them well before writing The End.

Uncle Lias Perkins recovered from his wounds and bids fair to become a centenarian, "if he lives long enough."

He was rewarded for his fidelity by a lucrative position at the New Find when that extremely valuable property was fairly developed, a position where he had plenty of honor and importance with the maximum of salary and minimum of work!

Morris Bogard likewise recovered from his injuries, and was given easier work than driving stage, in his growing years.

John Ironwood resigned his office as chief of the Vigilantes, making a public speech, in the course of which he bowed himself to the dust for coming so dangerously near hanging a wholly innocent man on purely circumstantial evidence.

"I'll never run the same resk ag'in, gentlemen, never!"

Jerry Mixture lay ill for a long time, but at length gained sufficient strength to bear removal, at once taking passage on the stage he had more than once assisted to "hold up," but whither he went after losing sight of Peculiar, no man seemed able to say.

And did Carlos Houghton ask any particular reward for saving the life and clearing the name of Rodney Church?

Well, I should say he did!

But, as long as Iva was willing (not to say glad) to pay the price demanded, what business is it of ours?

Pay it she did, and neither one has ever for an hour regretted that sacrifice.

After the wedding, every effort was made to find the relatives of poor Tom Hooper, but in vain. If he had any living, they never came forward in answer to the numerous advertisements, and for lack of a better division, a magnificent monument was erected to his memory there in Peculiar.

Rodney Church is now a married man, father of several promising children, and ever one of them glories in red hair.

Only to his wife and her brother did Carlos explain for what grave crime he had for so long hunted and trailed Hugh Kellar, but they never made that secret public property.

THE END.

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